SARAH ORNE JEWETT

A COUNTRY DOCTOR AND SELECTED STORIES AND SKETCHES

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Содержание

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A Country Doctor

I
THE LAST MILE

It had been one of the warm and almost sultry days which sometimes come in November; a maligned month, which is really an epitome of the other eleven, or a sort of index to the whole year's changes of storm and sunshine. The afternoon was like spring, the air was soft and damp, and the buds of the willows had been beguiled into swelling a little, so that there was a bloom over them, and the grass looked as if it had been growing green of late instead of fading steadily. It seemed like a reprieve from the doom of winter, or from even November itself.

The dense and early darkness which usually follows such unseasonable mildness had already begun to cut short the pleasures of this spring-like day, when a young woman, who carried a child in her arms, turned from a main road of Oldfields into a foot-path which led southward across the fields and pastures. She seemed sure of her way, and kept the path without difficulty, though a stranger might easily have lost it here and there, where it led among the patches of sweet-fern or bayberry bushes, or through shadowy tracts of small white-pines. She stopped sometimes to rest, and walked more and more wearily, with increasing effort; but she kept on her way desperately, as if it would not do to arrive much later at the place which she was seeking. The child seemed to be asleep; it looked too heavy for so slight a woman to carry.

The path led after a while to a more open country, there was a low hill to be climbed, and at its top the slender figure stopped and seemed to be panting for breath. A follower might have noticed that it bent its head over the child's for a moment as it stood, dark against the darkening sky. There had formerly been a defense against the Indians on this hill, which in the daytime commanded a fine view of the surrounding country, and the low earthworks or foundations of the garrison were still plainly to be seen. The woman seated herself on the sunken wall in spite of the dampness and increasing chill, still holding the child, and rocking to and fro like one in despair. The child waked and began to whine and cry a little in that strange, lonely place, and after a few minutes, perhaps to quiet it, they went on their way. Near the foot of the hill was a brook, swollen by the autumn rains; it made a loud noise in the quiet pasture, as if it were crying out against a wrong or some sad memory. The woman went toward it at first, following a slight ridge which was all that remained of a covered path which had led down from the garrison to the spring below at the brookside. If she had meant to quench her thirst here, she changed her mind, and suddenly turned to the right, following the brook a short distance, and then going straight toward the river itself and the high uplands, which by daylight were smooth pastures with here and there a tangled apple-tree or the grassy cellar of a long vanished farm-house.

It was night now; it was too late in the year for the chirp of any insects; the moving air, which could hardly be called wind, swept over in slow waves, and a few dry leaves rustled on an old hawthorn tree which grew beside the hollow where a house had been, and a low sound came from the river. The whole country side seemed asleep in the darkness, but the lonely woman felt no lack

of companionship; it was well suited to her own mood that the world slept and said nothing to her, —it seemed as if she were the only creature alive.

A little this side of the river shore there was an old burial place, a primitive spot enough, where the graves were only marked by rough stones, and the short, sheep-cropped grass was spread over departed generations of the farmers and their wives and children. By day it was in sight of the pine woods and the moving water, and nothing hid it from the great sky overhead, but now it was like a prison walled about by the barriers of night. However eagerly the woman had hurried to this place, and with what purpose she may have sought the river bank, when she recognized her surroundings she stopped for a moment, swaying and irresolute. "No, no!" sighed the child plaintively, and she shuddered, and started forward; then, as her feet stumbled among the graves, she turned and fled. It no longer seemed solitary, but as if a legion of ghosts which had been wandering under cover of the dark had discovered this intruder, and were chasing her and flocking around her and oppressing her from every side. And as she caught sight of a light in a far-away farmhouse window, a light which had been shining after her all the way down to the river, she tried to hurry toward it. The unnatural strength of terror urged her on; she retraced her steps like some pursued animal; she remembered, one after another, the fearful stories she had known of that ancient neighborhood; the child cried, but she could not answer it. She fell again and again, and at last all her strength seemed to fail her, her feet refused to carry her farther and she crept painfully, a few yards at a time, slowly along the ground. The fear of her superhuman enemies had forsaken her, and her only desire was to reach the light that shone from the looming shadow of the house.

At last she was close to it; at last she gave one great sigh, and the child fell from her grasp; at last she clutched the edge of the worn doorstep with both hands, and lay still.

II
THE FARM-HOUSE KITCHEN

Indoors there was a cheerful company; the mildness of the evening had enticed two neighbors of Mrs. Thacher, the mistress of the house, into taking their walks abroad, and so, with their heads well protected by large gingham handkerchiefs, they had stepped along the road and up the lane to spend a social hour or two. John Thacher, their old neighbor's son, was known to be away serving on a jury in the county town, and they thought it likely that his mother would enjoy company. Their own houses stood side by side. Mrs. Jacob Dyer and Mrs. Martin Dyer were their names, and excellent women they were. Their husbands were twin-brothers, curiously alike and amazingly fond of each other, though either would have scorned to make any special outward demonstration of it. They were spending the evening together in brother Martin's house, and were talking over the purchase of a bit of woodland, and the profit of clearing it, when their wives had left them without any apology to visit Mrs. Thacher, as we have already seen.

This was the nearest house and only a quarter of a mile away, and when they opened the door they had found Mrs. Thacher spinning.

"I must own up, I am glad to see you more'n common," she said. "I don't feel scary at being left sole alone; it ain't that, but I have been getting through with a lonesome spell of another kind. John, he does as well as a man can, but here I be,—here I be,"—and the good woman could say no more, while her guests understood readily enough the sorrow that had found no words.

"I suppose you haven't got no news from Ad'line?" asked Mrs. Martin bluntly. "We was speaking of her as we come along, and saying it seemed to be a pity she should'nt feel it was best to come back this winter and help you through; only one daughter, and left alone as you be, with the bad spells you are liable to in winter time—but there, it ain't her way—her ambitions ain't what they should be, that's all I can say."

"If she'd got a gift for anything special, now," continued Mrs. Jake, "we should feel it was different and want her to have a chance, but she's just like other folks for all she felt so much above farming. I don't see as she can do better than come back to the old place, or leastways to the village, and fetch up the little gal to be some use. She might dressmake or do millinery work; she always had a pretty taste, and 't would be better than roving. I 'spose 't would hurt her pride,"—but Mrs. Thacher flushed at this, and Mrs. Martin came to the rescue.

"You'll think we're reg'lar Job's comforters," cried the good soul hastily, "but there, Mis' Thacher, you know we feel as if she was our own. There ain't nothing I wouldn't do for Ad'line, sick or well, and I declare I believe she'll pull through yet and make a piece of luck that'll set us all to work praising of her. She's like to marry again for all I can see, with her good looks. Folks always has their joys and calamities as they go through the world."

Mrs. Thacher shook her head two or three times with a dismal expression, and made no answer. She had pushed back the droning wool-wheel which she had been using, and had taken her knitting from the shelf by the clock and seated herself contentedly, while Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin had each produced a blue yarn stocking from a capacious pocket, and the shining steel needles were presently all clicking together. One knitter after another would sheathe the spare needle under her apron strings, while they asked each other's advice from time to time about the propriety of "narrerin'" or whether it were not best to "widden" according to the progress their respective stockings had made. Mrs. Thacher had lighted an extra candle, and replenished the fire, for the air was chillier since the sun went down. They were all sure of a coming change of weather, and counted various signs, Mrs. Thacher's lowness of spirits among the number, while all three described various minor maladies from which they had suffered during the day, and of which the unseasonable weather was guilty.

"I can't get over the feeling that we are watchin' with somebody," said Mrs. Martin after a while, moved by some strange impulse and looking over her shoulder, at which remark Mrs. Thacher glanced up anxiously. "Something has been hanging over me all day," said she simply, and at this the needles clicked faster than ever.

"We've been taking rather a low range," suggested Mrs. Jake. "We shall get to telling over ghost stories if we don't look out, and I for one shall be sca't to go home. By the way, I suppose you have heard about old Billy Dow's experience night afore last, Mis' Thacher?"

"John being away, I ain't had nobody to fetch me the news these few days past," said the hostess. "Why what's happened to Billy now?"

The two women looked at each other: "He was getting himself home as best he could,—he owned up to having made a lively evenin' of it,—and I expect he was wandering all over the road and didn't know nothin' except that he was p'inted towards home, an' he stepped off from the high bank this side o' Dunnell's, and rolled down, over and over; and when he come to there was a great white creatur' a-standin' over him, and he thought 't was a ghost. 'T was higher up on the bank than him, and it kind of moved along down 's if 't was coming right on to him, and he got on to his knees and begun to say his Ten Commandments fast's he could rattle 'em out. He got 'em mixed up, and when the boys heard his teeth a-chattering, they began to laugh and he up an' cleared. Dunnell's boys had been down the road a piece and was just coming home, an' 't was their old white hoss that had got out of the barn, it bein' such a mild night, an' was wandering off. They said to Billy that't wa'n't everybody could lay a ghost so quick as he could, and they didn't 'spose he had the means so handy."

The three friends laughed, but Mrs. Thacher's face quickly lost its smile and took back its worried look. She evidently was in no mood for joking. "Poor Billy!" said she, "he was called the smartest boy in school; I rec'lect that one of the teachers urged his folks to let him go to college; but 't wa'n't no use; they hadn't the money and couldn't get it, and 't wa'n't in him to work his way as some do. He's got a master head for figur's. Folks used to get him to post books you know,—but he's past that now. Good-natured creatur' as ever stept; but he always was afeard of the dark,—'seems 's if I could see him there a-repentin' and the old white hoss shakin' his head,"—and she laughed again, but quickly stopped herself and looked over her shoulder at the window.

"Would ye like the curtain drawed?" asked Mrs. Jake. But Mrs. Thacher shook her head silently, while the gray cat climbed up into her lap and laid down in a round ball to sleep.

"She's a proper cosset, ain't she?" inquired Mrs. Martin approvingly, while Mrs. Jake asked about the candles, which gave a clear light. "Be they the last you run?" she inquired, but was answered to the contrary, and a brisk conversation followed upon the proper proportions of tallow and bayberry wax, and the dangers of the new-fangled oils which the village shop-keepers were attempting to introduce. Sperm oil was growing more and more dear in price and worthless in quality, and the old-fashioned lamps were reported to be past their usefulness.

"I must own I set most by good candle light," said Mrs. Martin. "'T is no expense to speak of where you raise the taller, and it's cheerful and bright in winter time. In old times when the houses were draftier they was troublesome about flickering, candles was; but land! think how comfortable we live now to what we used to! Stoves is such a convenience; the fire's so much handier. Housekeepin' don't begin to be the trial it was once."

"I must say I like old-fashioned cookin' better than oven cookin'," observed Mrs. Jake. "Seems to me's if the taste of things was all drawed up chimbly. Be you going to do much for Thanksgivin', Mis' Thacher? I 'spose not;" and moved by a sudden kind impulse, she added, "Why can't you and John jine with our folks? 't wouldn't put us out, and 'twill be lonesome for ye."

"'T won't be no lonesomer than last year was, nor the year before," and Mrs. Thacher's face quivered a little as she rose and took one of the candles, and opened the trap door that covered the cellar stairs. "Now don't ye go to makin' yourself work," cried the guests. "No, don't! we ain't needin'

nothin'; we was late about supper." But their hostess stepped carefully down and disappeared for a few minutes, while the cat hovered anxiously at the edge of the black pit.

"I forgot to ask ye if ye'd have some cider?" a sepulchral voice asked presently; "but I don't know now's I can get at it. I told John I shouldn't want any whilst he was away, and so he ain't got the spiggit in yet," to which Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin both replied that they were no hands for that drink, unless 't was a drop right from the press, or a taste o' good hard cider towards the spring of the year; and Mrs. Thacher soon returned with some slices of cake in a plate and some apples held in her apron. One of her neighbors took the candle as she reached up to put it on the floor, and when the trap door was closed again all three drew up to the table and had a little feast. The cake was of a kind peculiar to its maker, who prided herself upon never being without it; and there was some trick of her hand or a secret ingredient which was withheld when she responded with apparent cheerfulness to requests for its recipe. As for the apples, they were grown upon an old tree, one of whose limbs had been grafted with some unknown variety of fruit so long ago that the history was forgotten; only that an English gardener, many years before, had brought some cuttings from the old country, and one of them had somehow come into the possession of John Thacher's grandfather when grafted fruit was a thing to be treasured and jealously guarded. It had been told that when the elder Thacher had given away cuttings he had always stolen to the orchards in the night afterward and ruined them. However, when the family had grown more generous in later years it had seemed to be without avail, for, on their neighbors' trees or their own, the English apples had proved worthless. Whether it were some favoring quality in that spot of soil or in the sturdy old native tree itself, the rich golden apples had grown there, year after year, in perfection, but nowhere else.

"There ain't no such apples as these, to my mind," said Mrs. Martin, as she polished a large one with her apron and held it up to the light, and Mrs. Jake murmured assent, having already taken a sufficient first bite.

"There's only one little bough that bears any great," said Mrs. Thacher, "but it's come to that once before, and another branch has shot up and been likely as if it was a young tree."

The good souls sat comfortably in their splint-bottomed, straight-backed chairs, and enjoyed this mild attempt at a festival. Mrs. Thacher even grew cheerful and responsive, for her guests seemed so light-hearted and free from care that the sunshine of their presence warmed her own chilled and fearful heart. They embarked upon a wide sea of neighborhood gossip and parish opinions, and at last some one happened to speak again of Thanksgiving, which at once turned the tide of conversation, and it seemed to ebb suddenly, while the gray, dreary look once more overspread Mrs. Thacher's face.

"I don't see why you won't keep with our folks this year; you and John," once more suggested Mrs. Martin. "'T ain't wuth while to be making yourselves dismal here to home; the day'll be lonesome for you at best, and you shall have whatever we've got and welcome."

"'T won't be lonesomer this year than it was last, nor the year before that, and we've stood it somehow or 'nother," answered Mrs. Thacher for the second time, while she rose to put more wood in the stove. "Seems to me 't is growing cold; I felt a draught acrost my shoulders. These nights is dreadful chill; you feel the damp right through your bones. I never saw it darker than 't was last evenin'. I thought it seemed kind o' stived up here in the kitchen, and I opened the door and looked out, and I declare I couldn't see my hand before me."

"It always kind of scares me these black nights," said Mrs. Jake Dyer. "I expect something to clutch at me every minute, and I feel as if some sort of a creatur' was travelin' right behind me when I am out door in the dark. It makes it bad havin' a wanin' moon just now when the fogs hangs so low. It al'ays seems to me as if 't was darker when she rises late towards mornin' than when she's gone altogether. I do' know why't is."

"I rec'lect once," Mrs. Thacher resumed, "when Ad'line was a baby and John was just turned four year old, their father had gone down river in the packet, and I was expectin' on him home at supper time, but he didn't come; 't was late in the fall, and a black night as I ever see. Ad'line was

taken with something like croup, and I had an end o' candle in the candlestick that I lighted, and 't wa'n't long afore it was burnt down, and I went down cellar to the box where I kep' 'em, and if you will believe it, the rats had got to it, and there wasn't a week o' one left. I was near out anyway. We didn't have this cook-stove then, and I cal'lated I could make up a good lively blaze, so I come up full o' scold as I could be, and then I found I'd burnt up all my dry wood. You see, I thought certain he'd be home and I was tendin' to the child'n, but I started to go out o' the door and found it had come on to rain hard, and I said to myself I wouldn't go out to the woodpile and get my clothes all damp, 'count o' Ad'line, and the candle end would last a spell longer, and he'd be home by that time. I hadn't a least o' suspicion but what he was dallying round up to the Corners, 'long o' the rest o' the men, bein' 't was Saturday night, and I was some put out about it, for he knew the baby was sick, and I hadn't nobody with me. I set down and waited, but he never come, and it rained hard as I ever see it, and I left his supper standin' right in the floor, and then I begun to be distressed for fear somethin' had happened to Dan'l, and I set to work and cried, and the candle end give a flare and went out, and by 'n' by the fire begun to get low and I took the child'n and went to bed to keep warm; 't was an awful cold night, considerin' 't was such a heavy rain, and there I laid awake and thought I heard things steppin' about the room, and it seemed to me as if 't was a week long before mornin' come, and as if I'd got to be an old woman. I did go through with everything that night. 'T was that time Dan'l broke his leg, you know; they was takin' a deck load of oak knees down by the packet, and one on 'em rolled down from the top of the pile and struck him just below the knee. He was poling, for there wan't a breath o' wind, and he always felt certain there was somethin' mysterious about it. He'd had a good deal worse knocks than that seemed to be, as only left a black and blue spot, and he said he never see a deck load o' timber piled securer. He had some queer notions about the doin's o' sperits, Dan'l had; his old Aunt Parser was to blame for it. She lived with his father's folks, and used to fill him and the rest o' the child'n with all sorts o' ghost stories and stuff. I used to tell him she'd a' be'n hung for a witch if she'd lived in them old Salem days. He always used to be tellin' what everything was the sign of, when we was first married, till I laughed him out of it. It made me kind of notional. There's too much now we can't make sense of without addin' to it out o' our own heads."

Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin were quite familiar with the story of the night when there were no candles and Mr. Thacher had broken his leg, having been present themselves early in the morning afterward, but they had listened with none the less interest. These country neighbors knew their friends' affairs as well as they did their own, but such an audience is never impatient. The repetitions of the best stories are signal events, for ordinary circumstances do not inspire them. Affairs must rise to a certain level before a narration of some great crisis is suggested, and exactly as a city audience is well contented with hearing the plays of Shakespeare over and over again, so each man and woman of experience is permitted to deploy their well-known but always interesting stories upon the rustic stage.

"I must say I can't a-bear to hear anything about ghosts after sundown," observed Mrs. Jake, who was at times somewhat troubled by what she and her friends designated as "narves." "Day-times I don't believe in 'em 'less it's something creepy more'n common, but after dark it scares me to pieces. I do' know but I shall be afeared to go home," and she laughed uneasily. "There! when I get through with this needle I believe I won't knit no more. The back o' my neck is all numb."

"Don't talk o' goin' home yet awhile," said the hostess, looking up quickly as if she hated the thought of being left alone again. "'T is just on the edge of the evenin'; the nights is so long now we think it's bedtime half an hour after we've got lit up. 'T was a good lift havin' you step over to-night. I was really a-dreadin' to set here by myself," and for some minutes nobody spoke and the needles clicked faster than ever. Suddenly there was a strange sound outside the door, and they stared at each other in terror and held their breath, but nobody stirred. This was no familiar footstep; presently they heard a strange little cry, and still they feared to look, or to know what was waiting outside. Then Mrs. Thacher took a candle in her hand, and, still hesitating, asked once, "Who is there?" and, hearing no answer, slowly opened the door.

III
AT JAKE AND MARTIN'S

In the mean time, the evening had been much enjoyed by the brothers who were spending it together in Martin Dyer's kitchen. The houses stood side by side, but Mr. Jacob Dyer's youngest daughter, the only one now left at home, was receiving a visit from her lover, or, as the family expressed it, the young man who was keeping company with her, and her father, mindful of his own youth, had kindly withdrawn. Martin's children were already established in homes of their own, with the exception of one daughter who was at work in one of the cotton factories at Lowell in company with several of her acquaintances. It has already been said that Jake and Martin liked nobody's company so well as their own. Their wives had a time-honored joke about being comparatively unnecessary to their respective partners, and indeed the two men had a curiously dependent feeling toward each other. It was the close sympathy which twins sometimes have each to each, and had become a byword among all their acquaintances. They were seldom individualized in any way, and neither was able to distinguish himself, apparently, for one always heard of the family as Jake and Martin's folks, and of their possessions, from least to greatest, as belonging to both brothers. The only time they had ever been separated was once in their early youth, when Jake had been fired with a desire to go to sea; but he deserted the coastwise schooner in the first port and came home, because he could not bear it any longer without his brother. Martin had no turn for seafaring, so Jake remained ashore and patiently made a farmer of himself for love's sake, and in spite of a great thirst for adventure that had never ceased to fever his blood. It was astonishing how much they found to say to each other when one considers that their experiences were almost constantly the same; but nothing contented them better than an uninterrupted evening spent in each other's society, and as they hoed corn or dug potatoes, or mowed, or as they drove to the Corners, sitting stiffly upright in the old-fashioned thorough-braced wagon, they were always to be seen talking as if it were the first meeting after a long separation. But, having taken these quiet times for the discussion of all possible and impossible problems, they were men of fixed opinions, and were ready at a moment's warning to render exact decisions. They were not fond of society as a rule; they found little occasion for much talk with their neighbors, but used as few words as possible. Nobody was more respected than the brothers. It was often said of them that their word was their bond, and as they passed from youth to middle age, and in these days were growing to look like elderly men, they were free from shame or reproach, though not from much good-natured joking and friendly fun. Their farm had been owned in the family since the settlement of the country, and the house which Martin occupied was very old. Jake's had been built for him when he was married, from timber cut in their own woodlands, and after thirty years of wear it looked scarcely newer than its companion. And when it is explained that they had married sisters, because, as people said, they even went courting together, it will be easy to see that they had found life more harmonious than most people do. Sometimes the wife of one brother would complain that her sister enjoyed undue advantages and profits from the estate, but there was rarely any disagreement, and Mrs. Jake was mistress of the turkeys and Mrs. Martin held sway over the hens, while they divided the spoils amiably at Thanksgiving time when the geese were sold. If it were a bad year for turkeys, and the tender young were chilled in the wet grass, while the hens flourished steadily the season through, Mrs. Jake's spirits drooped and she became envious of the good fortune which flaunted itself before her eyes, but on the whole, they suffered and enjoyed together, and found no fault with their destinies. The two wives, though the affection between them was of an ordinary sort, were apt to form a league against the brothers, and this prevented a more troublesome rivalry which might have existed between the households.

Jake and Martin were particularly enjoying the evening. Some accident had befallen the cooking-stove, which the brothers had never more than half approved, it being one of the early

patterns, and a poor exchange for the ancient methods of cookery in the wide fireplace. "The women" had had a natural desire to be equal with their neighbors, and knew better than their husbands did the difference this useful invention had made in their every-day work. However, this one night the conservative brothers could take a mild revenge; and when their wives were well on their way to Mrs. Thacher's they had assured each other that, if the plaguey thing were to be carried to the Corners in the morning to be exchanged or repaired, it would be as well to have it in readiness, and had quickly taken down its pipes and lifted it as if it were a feather to the neighboring woodshed. Then they hastily pried away a fireboard which closed the great fireplace, and looked smilingly upon the crane and its pothooks and the familiar iron dogs which had been imprisoned there in darkness for many months. They brought in the materials for an old-fashioned fire, backlog, forestick, and crowsticks, and presently seated themselves before a crackling blaze. Martin brought a tall, brown pitcher of cider from the cellar and set two mugs beside it on the small table, and for some little time they enjoyed themselves in silence, after which Jake remarked that he didn't know but they'd got full enough of a fire for such a mild night, but he wished his own stove and the new one too could be dropped into the river for good and all.

They put the jug of cider between the andirons, and then, moved by a common impulse, drew their chairs a little farther from the mounting flames, before they quenched their thirst from the mugs.

"I call that pretty cider," said Martin; "'tis young yet, but it has got some weight a'ready, and 'tis smooth. There's a sight o' difference between good upland fruit and the sposhy apples that grows in wet ground. An' I take it that the bar'l has an influence: some bar'ls kind of wilt cider and some smarten it up, and keep it hearty. Lord! what stuff some folks are willin' to set before ye! 'tain't wuth the name o' cider, nor no better than the rensin's of a vinegar cask."

"And then there's weather too," agreed Mr. Jacob Dyer, "had ought to be took into consideration. Git your apples just in the right time—not too early to taste o' the tree, nor too late to taste o' the ground, and just in the snap o' time as to ripeness', on a good sharp day with the sun a-shining; have 'em into the press and what comes out is *cider*. I think if we've had any fault in years past, 't was puttin' off makin' a little too late. But I don't see as this could be beat. I don't know's you feel like a pipe, but I believe I'll light up," and thereupon a good portion of black-looking tobacco was cut and made fine in each of the hard left hands, and presently the clay pipes were touched off with a live coal, and great clouds of smoke might have been seen to disappear under the edge of the fire-place, drawn quickly up the chimney by the draft of the blazing fire.

Jacob pushed back his chair another foot or two, and Martin soon followed, mentioning that it was getting hot, but it was well to keep out the damp.

"What set the women out to go traipsin' up to Thacher's folks?" inquired Jacob, holding his cider mug with one hand and drumming it with the finger ends of the other.

"I had an idee that they wanted to find out if anything had been heard about Ad'line's getting home for Thanksgiving," answered Martin, turning to look shrewdly at his brother. "Women folks does suffer if there's anything goin' on they can't find out about. 'Liza said she was going to invite Mis' Thacher and John to eat a piece o' our big turkey, but she didn't s'pose they'd want to leave. Curi's about Ad'line, ain't it? I expected when her husband died she'd be right back here with what she'd got; at any rate, till she'd raised the child to some size. There'd be no expense here to what she'd have elsewhere, and here's her ma'am beginnin' to age. She can't do what she used to, John was tellin' of me; and I don't doubt 't 'as worn upon her more'n folks thinks."

"I don't lay no great belief that John'll get home from court," said Jacob Dyer. "They say that court's goin' to set till Christmas maybe; there's an awful string o' cases on the docket. Oh, 't was you told me, wa'n't it? Most like they'll let up for a couple o' days for Thanksgivin', but John mightn't think't was wuth his while to travel here and back again 'less he had something to do before winter shets down. Perhaps they'll prevail upon the old lady, I wish they would, I'm sure; but an only daughter forsakin' her so, 'twas most too bad of Ad'line. She al'ays had dreadful high notions when she wa'n't

no more'n a baby; and, good conscience, how she liked to rig up when she first used to come back from Lowell! Better ha' put her money out to interest."

"I believe in young folks makin' all they can o' theirselves," announced Martin, puffing hard at his pipe and drawing a little farther still from the fireplace, because the scorching red coals had begun to drop beneath the forestick. "I've give my child'n the best push forrard I could, an' you've done the same. Ad'line had a dreadful cravin' to be somethin' more'n common; but it don't look as if she was goin' to make out any great. 'Twas unfortunate her losin' of her husband, but I s'pose you've heard hints that they wa'n't none too equal-minded. She'd a done better to have worked on a while to Lowell and got forehanded, and then married some likely young fellow and settled down here, or to the Corners if she didn't want to farm it. There was Jim Hall used to be hanging round, and she'd been full as well off to-day if she'd took him, too. 'T ain't no use for folks to marry one that's of another kind and belongs different. It's like two fiddles that plays different tunes,—you can't make nothin' on't, no matter if both on em's trying their best, 'less one on 'em beats the other down entirely and has all the say, and ginerally 't is the worst one does it. Ad'line's husband wa'n't nothin' to boast of from all we can gather, but they didn't think alike about nothin'. She could 'a' done well with him if there'd been more of *her*. I don't marvel his folks felt bad: Ad'line didn't act right by 'em."

"Nor they by her," said the twin brother. "I tell ye Ad'line would have done 'em credit if she'd been let. I seem to think how't was with her; when she was there to work in the shop she thought 't would be smart to marry him and then she'd be a lady for good and all. And all there was of it, she found his folks felt put out and hurt, and instead of pleasing 'em up and doing the best she could, she didn't know no better than to aggravate 'em. She was wrong there, but I hold to it that if they'd pleased her up a little and done well by her, she'd ha' bloomed out, and fell right in with their ways. She's got outward ambitions enough, but I view it she was all a part of his foolishness to them; I dare say they give her the blame o' the whole on't. Ad'line ought to had the sense to see they had some right on their side. Folks say he was the smartest fellow in his class to college."

"Good King Agrippy! how hot it does git," said Jake rising indignantly, as if the fire alone were to blame. "I must shove back the cider again or 't will bile over, spite of everything. But 't is called unwholesome to get a house full o' damp in the fall o' the year; 't will freeze an' thaw in the walls all winter. I must git me a new pipe if we go to the Corners to-morrow. I s'pose I've told ye of a pipe a man had aboard the schooner that time I went to sea?"

Martin gave a little grumble of assent.

"'Twas made o' some sort o' whitish stuff like clay, but 'twa'n't shaped like none else I ever see and it had a silver trimmin' round it; 'twas very light to handle and it drawed most excellent. I al'ays kind o' expected he may have stole it; he was a hard lookin' customer, a Dutchman or from some o' them parts o' the earth. I wish while I was about it I'd gone one trip more."

"Was it you was tellin' me that Ad'line was to work again in Lowell? I shouldn't think her husband's folks would want the child to be fetched up there in them boardin' houses"—

"Belike they don't," responded Jacob, "but when they get Ad'line to come round to their ways o' thinkin' now, after what's been and gone, they'll have cause to thank themselves. She's just like her gre't grandsir Thacher; you can see she's made out o' the same stuff. You might ha' burnt him to the stake, and he'd stick to it he liked it better'n hanging and al'ays meant to die that way. There's an awful bad streak in them Thachers, an' you know it as well as I do. I expect there'll be bad and good Thachers to the end o' time. I'm glad for the old lady's sake that John ain't one o' the drinkin' ones. Ad'line'll give no favors to her husband's folks, nor take none. There's plenty o' wrongs to both sides, but as I view it, the longer he'd lived the worse 't would been for him. She was a well made, pretty lookin' girl, but I tell ye 't was like setting a laylock bush to grow beside an ellum tree, and expecting of 'em to keep together. They wa'n't mates. He'd had a different fetchin' up, and he *was* different, and I wa'n't surprised when I come to see how things had turned out,—I believe I shall have to set the door open a half a minute, 't is gettin' dreadful"—but there was a sudden flurry outside, and the

sound of heavy footsteps, the bark of the startled cur, who was growing very old and a little deaf, and Mrs. Martin burst into the room and sank into the nearest chair, to gather a little breath before she could tell her errand. "For God's sake what's happened?" cried the men.

They presented a picture of mingled comfort and misery at which Mrs. Martin would have first laughed and then scolded at any other time. The two honest red faces were well back toward the farther side of the room from the fire, which still held its own; it was growing toward low tide in the cider jug and its attendant mugs, and the pipes were lying idle. The mistress of the old farm-house did not fail to notice that high treason had been committed during her short absence, but she made no comment upon the fireplace nor on anything else, and gasped as soon as she could that one of the men must go right up to the Corners for the doctor and hurry back with him, for't was a case of life and death.

"Mis' Thacher?" "Was it a shock?" asked the brothers in sorrowful haste, while Mrs. Martin told the sad little story of Adeline's having come from nobody knew where, wet and forlorn, carrying her child in her arms. She looked as if she were in the last stages of a decline. She had fallen just at the doorstep and they had brought her in, believing that she was dead. "But while there's life, there's hope," said Mrs. Martin, "and I'll go back with you if you'll harness up. Jacob must stop to look after this gre't fire or 'twill burn the house down," and this was the punishment which befell Jacob, since nothing else would have kept him from also journeying toward the Thacher house.

A little later the bewildered horse had been fully wakened and harnessed; Jacob's daughter and her lover had come eagerly out to hear what had happened; Mrs. Martin had somehow found a chance amidst all the confusion to ascend to her garret in quest of some useful remedies in the shape of herbs, and then she and her husband set forth on their benevolent errands. Martin was very apt to look on the dark side of things, and it was a curious fact that while the two sisters were like the brothers, one being inclined to despondency and one to enthusiasm, the balance was well kept by each of the men having chosen his opposite in temperament. Accordingly, while Martin heaved a great sigh from time to time and groaned softly, "Pore gal—pore gal!" his partner was brimful of zealous eagerness to return to the scene of distress and sorrow which she had lately left. Next to the doctor himself, she was the authority on all medical subjects for that neighborhood, and it was some time since her skill had been needed.

"Does the young one seem likely?" asked Martin with solemn curiosity.

"Fur's I could see," answered his wife promptly, "but nobody took no great notice of it. Pore Ad'line catched hold of it with such a grip as she was comin' to that we couldn't git it away from her and had to fetch'em in both to once. Come urge the beast along, Martin, I'll give ye the partic'lars to-morrow, I do' know's Ad'line's livin' now. We got her right to bed's I told you, and I set right off considerin' that I could git over the ground fastest of any. Mis' Thacher of course wouldn't leave and Jane's heavier than I be." Martin's smile was happily concealed by the darkness; his wife and her sister had both grown stout steadily as they grew older, but each insisted upon the other's greater magnitude and consequent incapacity for quick movement. A casual observer would not have been persuaded that there was a pound's weight of difference between them.

Martin Dyer meekly suggested that perhaps he'd better go in a minute to see if there was anything Mis' Thacher needed, but Eliza, his wife, promptly said that she didn't want anything but the doctor as quick as she could get him, and disappeared up the short lane while the wagon rattled away up the road. The white mist from the river clung close to the earth, and it was impossible to see even the fences near at hand, though overhead there were a few dim stars. The air had grown somewhat softer, yet there was a sharp chill in it, and the ground was wet and sticky under foot. There were lights in the bedroom and in the kitchen of the Thacher house, but suddenly the bedroom candle flickered away and the window was darkened. Mrs. Martin's heart gave a quick throb, perhaps Adeline had already died. It might have been a short-sighted piece of business that she had gone home for her husband.

IV
LIFE AND DEATH

The sick woman had refused to stay in the bedroom after she had come to her senses. She had insisted that she could not breathe, and that she was cold and must go back to the kitchen. Her mother and Mrs. Jake had wrapped her in blankets and drawn the high-backed wooden rocking chair close to the stove, and here she was just established when Mrs. Martin opened the outer door. Any one of less reliable nerves would have betrayed the shock which the sight of such desperate illness must have given. The pallor, the suffering, the desperate agony of the eyes, were far worse than the calmness of death, but Mrs. Martin spoke cheerfully, and even when her sister whispered that their patient had been attacked by a hæmorrhage, she manifested no concern.

"How long has this be'n a-goin' on, Ad'line? Why didn't you come home before and get doctored up? You're all run down." Mrs. Thacher looked frightened when this questioning began, but turned her face toward her daughter, eager to hear the answer.

"I've been sick off and on all summer," said the young woman, as if it were almost impossible to make the effort of speaking. "See if the baby's covered up warm, will you, Aunt 'Liza?"

"Yes, dear," said the kind-hearted woman, the tears starting to her eyes at the sound of the familiar affectionate fashion of speech which Adeline had used in her childhood. "Don't you worry one mite; we're going to take care of you and the little gal too;" and then nobody spoke, while the only sound was the difficult breathing of the poor creature by the fire. She seemed like one dying, there was so little life left in her after her piteous homeward journey. The mother watched her eagerly with a mingled feeling of despair and comfort; it was terrible to have a child return in such sad plight, but it was a blessing to have her safe at home, and to be able to minister to her wants while life lasted.

They all listened eagerly for the sound of wheels, but it seemed a long time before Martin Dyer returned with the doctor. He had been met just as he was coming in from the other direction, and the two men had only paused while the tired horse was made comfortable, and a sleepy boy dispatched with the medicine for which he had long been waiting. The doctor's housekeeper had besought him to wait long enough to eat the supper which she had kept waiting, but he laughed at her and shook his head gravely, as if he already understood that there should be no delay. When he was fairly inside the Thacher kitchen, the benefaction of his presence was felt by every one. It was most touching to see the patient's face lose its worried look, and grow quiet and comfortable as if here were some one on whom she could entirely depend. The doctor's greeting was an every-day cheerful response to the women's welcome, and he stood for a minute warming his hands at the fire as if he had come upon a commonplace errand. There was something singularly self-reliant and composed about him; one felt that he was the wielder of great powers over the enemies, disease and pain, and that his brave hazel eyes showed a rare thoughtfulness and foresight. The rough driving coat which he had thrown off revealed a slender figure with the bowed shoulders of an untiring scholar. His head was finely set and scholarly, and there was that about him which gave certainty, not only of his sagacity and skill, but of his true manhood, his mastery of himself. Not only in this farm-house kitchen, but wherever one might place him, he instinctively took command, while from his great knowledge of human nature he could understand and help many of his patients whose ailments were not wholly physical. He seemed to read at a glance the shame and sorrow of the young woman who had fled to the home of her childhood, dying and worse than defeated, from the battle-field of life. And in this first moment he recognized with dismay the effects of that passion for strong drink which had been the curse of more than one of her ancestors. Even the pallor and the purifying influence of her mortal illness could not disguise these unmistakable signs.

"You can't do me any good, doctor," she whispered. "I shouldn't have let you come if it had been only that. I don't care how soon I am out of this world. But I want you should look after my

little girl," and the poor soul watched the physician's face with keen anxiety as if she feared to see a shadow of unwillingness, but none came.

"I will do the best I can," and he still held her wrist, apparently thinking more of the fluttering pulse than of what poor Adeline was saying.

"That was what made me willing to come back," she continued, "you don't know how close I came to not doing it either. John will be good to her, but she will need somebody that knows the world better by and by. I wonder if you couldn't show me how to make out a paper giving you the right over her till she is of age? She must stay here with mother, long as she wants her. 'Tis what I wish I had kept sense enough to do; life hasn't been all play to me;" and the tears began to roll quickly down the poor creature's thin cheeks. "The only thing I care about is leaving the baby well placed, and I want her to have a good chance to grow up a useful woman. And most of all to keep her out of *their* hands, I mean her father's folks. I hate 'em, and he cared more for 'em than he did for me, long at the last of it.... I could tell you stories!"—

"But not to-night, Addy," said the doctor gravely, as if he were speaking to a child. "We must put you to bed and to sleep, and you can talk about all these troublesome things in the morning. You shall see about the papers too, if you think best. Be a good girl now, and let your mother help you to bed." For the resolute spirit had summoned the few poor fragments of vitality that were left, and the sick woman was growing more and more excited. "You may have all the pillows you wish for, and sit up in bed if you like, but you mustn't stay here any longer," and he gathered her in his arms and quickly carried her to the next room. She made no resistance, and took the medicine which Mrs. Martin brought, without a word. There was a blazing fire now in the bedroom fire-place, and, as she lay still, her face took on a satisfied, rested look. Her mother sat beside her, tearful, and yet contented and glad to have her near, and the others whispered together in the kitchen. It might have been the last night of a long illness instead of the sudden, startling entrance of sorrow in human shape. "No," said the doctor, "she cannot last much longer with such a cough as that, Mrs. Dyer. She has almost reached the end of it. I only hope that she will go quickly."

And sure enough; whether the fatal illness had run its natural course, or whether the excitement and the forced strength of the evening before had exhausted the small portion of strength that was left, when the late dawn lighted again those who watched, it found them sleeping, and one was never to wake again in the world she had found so disappointing to her ambitions, and so untrue to its fancied promises.

The doctor had promised to return early, but it was hardly daylight before there was another visitor in advance of him. Old Mrs. Meeker, a neighbor whom nobody liked, but whose favor everybody for some reason or other was anxious to keep, came knocking at the door, and was let in somewhat reluctantly by Mrs. Jake, who was just preparing to go home in order to send one or both the brothers to the village and to acquaint John Thacher with the sad news of his sister's death. He was older than Adeline, and a silent man, already growing to be elderly in his appearance. The women had told themselves and each other that he would take this sorrow very hard, and Mrs. Thacher had said sorrowfully that she must hide her daughter's poor worn clothes, since it would break John's heart to know she had come home so beggarly. The shock of so much trouble was stunning the mother; she did not understand yet, she kept telling the kind friends who sorrowed with her, as she busied herself with the preparations for the funeral. "It don't seem as if 'twas Addy," she said over and over again, "but I feel safe about her now, to what I did," and Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin, good helpful souls and brimful of compassion, went to and fro with their usual diligence almost as if this were nothing out of the common course of events.

Mrs. Meeker had heard the wagon go by and had caught the sound of the doctor's voice, her house being close by the road, and she had also watched the unusual lights. It was annoying to the Dyers to have to answer questions, and to be called upon to grieve outwardly just then, and it seemed disloyal to the dead woman in the next room to enter upon any discussion of her affairs. But presently

the little child, whom nobody had thought of except to see that she still slept, waked and got down from the old settle where she had spent the night, and walked with unsteady short footsteps toward her grandmother, who caught her quickly and held her fast in her arms. The little thing looked puzzled, and frowned, and seemed for a moment unhappy, and then the sunshine of her good nature drove away the clouds and she clapped her hands and laughed aloud, while Mrs. Meeker began to cry again at the sight of this unconscious orphan.

"I'm sure I'm glad she can laugh," said Mrs. Martin. "She'll find enough to cry about later on; I foresee she'll be a great deal o' company to you, Mis' Thacher."

"Though 't ain't every one that has the strength to fetch up a child after they reach your years," said Mrs. Meeker, mournfully. "It's anxious work, but I don't doubt strength will be given you. I s'pose likely her father's folks will do a good deal for her,"—and the three women looked at each other, but neither took it upon herself to answer.

All that day the neighbors and acquaintances came and went in the lane that led to the farm-house. The brothers Jake and Martin made journeys to and from the village. At night John Thacher came home from court with as little to say as ever, but, as everybody observed, looking years older. Young Mrs. Prince's return and sudden death were the only subjects worth talking about in all the country side, and the doctor had to run the usual gauntlet of questions from all his outlying patients and their families. Old Mrs. Thacher looked pale and excited, and insisted upon seeing every one who came to the house, with evident intention to play her part in this strange drama with exactness and courtesy. A funeral in the country is always an era in a family's life; events date from it and centre in it. There are so few circumstances that have in the least a public nature that these conspicuous days receive all the more attention.

But while death seems far more astonishing and unnatural in a city, where the great tide of life rises and falls with little apparent regard to the sinking wrecks, in the country it is not so. The neighbors themselves are those who dig the grave and carry the dead, whom they or their friends have made ready, to the last resting-place. With all nature looking on,—the leaves that must fall, and the grass of the field that must wither and be gone when the wind passes over,—living closer to life and in plainer sight of death, they have a different sense of the mysteries of existence. They pay homage to Death rather than to the dead; they gather from the lonely farms by scores because there is a funeral, and not because their friend is dead; and the day of Adeline Prince's burial, the marvelous circumstances, with which the whole town was already familiar, brought a great company together to follow her on her last journey.

The day was warm and the sunshine fell caressingly over the pastures as if it were trying to call back the flowers. By afternoon there was a tinge of greenness on the slopes and under the gnarled apple-trees, that had been lost for days before, and the distant hills and mountains, which could be seen in a circle from the high land where the Thacher farmhouse stood, were dim and blue through the Indian summer haze. The old men who came to the funeral wore their faded winter overcoats and clumsy caps all ready to be pulled down over their ears if the wind should change; and their wives were also warmly wrapped, with great shawls over their rounded, hard-worked shoulders; yet they took the best warmth and pleasantness into their hearts, and watched the sad proceedings of the afternoon with deepest interest. The doctor came hurrying toward home just as the long procession was going down the pasture, and he saw it crossing a low hill; a dark and slender column with here and there a child walking beside one of the elder mourners. The bearers went first with the bier; the track was uneven, and the procession was lost to sight now and then behind the slopes. It was forever a mystery; these people might have been a company of Druid worshipers, or of strange northern priests and their people, and the doctor checked his impatient horse as he watched the retreating figures at their simple ceremony. He could not help thinking what strange ways this child of the old farm had followed, and what a quiet ending it was to her wandering life. "And I have promised to look after the little girl," he said to himself as he drove away up the road.

It was a long walk for the elderly people from the house near the main highway to the little burying-ground. In the earliest days of the farm the dwelling-place was nearer the river, which was then the chief thoroughfare; and those of the family who had died then were buried on the level bit of upland ground high above the river itself. There was a wide outlook over the country, and the young pine trees that fringed the shore sang in the south wind, while some great birds swung to and fro overhead, watching the water and the strange company of people who had come so slowly over the land. A flock of sheep had ventured to the nearest hillock of the next pasture, and stood there fearfully, with upraised heads, as if they looked for danger.

John Thacher had brought his sister's child all the way in his arms, and she had clapped her hands and laughed aloud and tried to talk a great deal with the few words she had learned to say. She was very gay in her baby fashion; she was amused with the little crowd so long as it did not trouble her. She fretted only when the grave, kind man, for whom she had instantly felt a great affection, stayed too long by that deep hole in the ground and wept as he saw a strange thing that the people had carried all the way, put down into it out of sight. When he walked on again, she laughed and played; but after they had reached the empty gray house, which somehow looked that day as if it were a mourner also, she shrank from all the strangers, and seemed dismayed and perplexed, and called her mother eagerly again and again. This touched many a heart. The dead woman had been more or less unfamiliar of late years to all of them; and there were few who had really grieved for her until her little child had reminded them of its own loneliness and loss.

That night, after the house was still, John Thacher wrote to acquaint Miss Prince, of Dunport, with his sister's death and to say that it was her wish that the child should remain with them during its minority. They should formally appoint the guardian whom she had selected; they would do their best by the little girl. And when Mrs. Thacher asked if he had blamed Miss Prince, he replied that he had left that to her own conscience.

In the answer which was quickly returned, there was a plea for the custody of the child, her mother's and her own namesake, but this was indignantly refused. There was no love lost between the town and the country household, and for many years all intercourse was at an end. Before twelve months were past, John Thacher himself was carried down to the pasture burying-ground, and his old mother and the little child were left to comfort and take care of each other as best they could in the lonely farm-house.

V
A SUNDAY VISIT

In the gray house on the hill, one spring went by and another, and it seemed to the busy doctor only a few months from the night he first saw his ward before she was old enough to come soberly to church with her grandmother. He had always seen her from time to time, for he had often been called to the farm or to the Dyers and had watched her at play. Once she had stopped him as he drove by to give him a little handful of blue violets, and this had gone straight to his heart, for he had been made too great a bugbear to most children to look for any favor at their hands. He always liked to see her come into church on Sundays, her steps growing quicker and surer as her good grandmother's became more feeble. The doctor was a lonely man in spite of his many friends, and he found himself watching for the little brown face that, half-way across the old meeting-house, would turn round to look for him more than once during the service. At first there was only the top of little Nan Prince's prim best bonnet or hood to be seen, unless it was when she stood up in prayer-time, but soon the bright eyes rose like stars above the horizon of the pew railing, and next there was the whole well-poised little head, and the tall child was possessed by a sense of propriety, and only ventured one or two discreet glances at her old friend.

The office of guardian was not one of great tasks or of many duties, though the child's aunt had insisted upon making an allowance for her of a hundred dollars a year, and this was duly acknowledged and placed to its owner's credit in the savings bank of the next town. Her grandmother Thacher always refused to spend it, saying proudly that she had never been beholden to Miss Prince and she never meant to be, and while she lived the aunt and niece should be kept apart. She would not say that her daughter had never been at fault, but it was through the Princes all the trouble of her life had come.

Dr. Leslie was mindful of his responsibilities, and knew more of his ward than was ever suspected. He was eager that the best district school teacher who could be found should be procured for the Thacher and Dyer neighborhood, and in many ways he took pains that the little girl should have all good things that were possible. He only laughed when her grandmother complained that Nan would not be driven to school, much less persuaded, and that she was playing in the brook, or scampering over the pastures when she should be doing other things. Mrs. Thacher, perhaps unconsciously, had looked for some trace of the father's good breeding and gentlefolk fashions, but this was not a child who took kindly to needlework and pretty clothes. She was fearlessly friendly with every one; she did not seem confused even when the minister came to make his yearly parochial visitation, and as for the doctor, he might have been her own age, for all humility she thought it necessary to show in the presence of this chief among her elders and betters. Old Mrs. Thacher gave little pulls at her granddaughter's sleeves when she kept turning to see the doctor in sermon-time, but she never knew how glad he was, or how willingly he smiled when he felt the child's eyes watching him as a dog's might have done, forcing him to forget the preaching altogether and to attend to this dumb request for sympathy. One blessed day Dr. Leslie had waited in the church porch and gravely taken the child's hand as she came out; and said that he should like to take her home with him; he was going to the lower part of the town late in the afternoon and would leave her then at the farm-house.

"I was going to ask you for something for her shoulder," said Grandmother Thacher, much pleased, "she'll tell you about it, it was a fall she had out of an apple-tree,"—and Nan looked up with not a little apprehension, but presently tucked her small hand inside the doctor's and was more than ready to go with him. "I thought she looked a little pale," the doctor said, to which Mrs. Thacher answered that it was a merciful Providence who had kept the child from breaking her neck, and then, being at the foot of the church steps, they separated. It had been a great trial to the good woman to give up the afternoon service, but she was growing old, as she told herself often in those days, and felt, as she certainly looked, greatly older than her years.

"I feel as if Anna was sure of one good friend, whether I stay with her or not," said the grandmother sorrowfully, as she drove toward home that Sunday noon with Jacob Dyer and his wife. "I never saw the doctor so taken with a child before. 'Twas a pity he had to lose his own, and his wife too; how many years ago was it? I should think he'd be lonesome, though to be sure he isn't in the house much. Marilla Thomas keeps his house as clean as a button and she has been a good stand-by for him, but it always seemed sort o' homesick there ever since the day I was to his wife's funeral. She made an awful sight o' friends considering she was so little while in the place. Well I'm glad I let Nanny wear her best dress; I set out not to, it looked so much like rain."

Whatever Marilla Thomas's other failings might have been, she certainly was kind that day to the doctor's little guest. It would have been a hard-hearted person indeed who did not enter somewhat into the spirit of the child's delight. In spite of its being the first time she had ever sat at any table but her grandmother's, she was not awkward or uncomfortable, and was so hungry that she gave pleasure to her entertainers in that way if no other. The doctor leaned back in his chair and waited while the second portion of pudding slowly disappeared, though Marilla could have told that he usually did not give half time enough to his dinner and was off like an arrow the first possible minute. Before he took his often interrupted afternoon nap, he inquired for the damaged shoulder and requested a detailed account of the accident; and presently they were both laughing heartily at Nan's disaster, for she owned that she had chased and treed a stray young squirrel, and that a mossy branch of one of the old apple-trees in the straggling orchard had failed to bear even so light a weight as hers. Nan had come to the ground because she would not loose her hold of the squirrel, though he had slipped through her hands after all as she carried him towards home. The guest was proud to become a patient, especially as the only remedy that was offered was a very comfortable handful of sugar-plums. Nan had never owned so many at once, and in a transport of gratitude and affection she lifted her face to kiss so dear a benefactor.

Her eyes looked up into his, and her simple nature was so unconscious of the true dangers and perils of this world, that his very heart was touched with compassion, and he leagued himself with the child's good angel to defend her against her enemies.

And Nan took fast hold of the doctor's hand as they went to the study. This was the only room in the house which she had seen before; and was so much larger and pleasanter than any she knew elsewhere that she took great delight in it. It was a rough place now, the doctor thought, but always very comfortable, and he laid himself down on the great sofa with a book in his hand, though after a few minutes he grew sleepy and only opened his eyes once to see that Nan was perched in the largest chair with her small hands folded, and her feet very far from the floor. "You may run out to see Marilla, or go about the house anywhere you like; or there are some picture-papers on the table," the doctor said drowsily, and the visitor slipped down from her throne and went softly away.

She had thought the study a very noble room until she had seen the dining-room, but now she wished for another look at the pictures there and the queer clock, and the strange, grand things on the sideboard. The old-fashioned comfort of the house was perfect splendor to the child, and she went about on tiptoe up stairs and down, looking in at the open doors, while she lingered wistfully before the closed ones. She wondered at the great bedsteads with their high posts and dimity hangings, and at the carpets, and the worthy Marilla watched her for a moment as she stood on the threshold of the doctor's own room. The child's quick ear caught the rustle of the housekeeper's Sunday gown; she whispered with shining eyes that she thought the house was beautiful. Did Marilla live here all the time?

"Bless you, yes!" replied Marilla, not without pride, though she added that nobody knew what a sight of care it was.

"I suppose y'r aunt in Dunport lives a good deal better than this;" but the child only looked puzzled and did not answer, while the housekeeper hurried away to the afternoon meeting, for which the bell was already tolling.

The doctor slept on in the shaded study, and after Nan had grown tired of walking softly about the house, she found her way into the garden. After all, there was nothing better than being out of doors, and the apple-trees seemed most familiar and friendly, though she pitied them for being placed so near each other. She discovered a bench under a trellis where a grape-vine and a clematis were tangled together, and here she sat down to spend a little time before the doctor should call her. She wished she could stay longer than that one short afternoon; perhaps some time or other the doctor would invite her again. But what could Marilla have meant about her aunt? She had no aunts except Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin; Marilla must well know that their houses were not like Dr. Leslie's; and little Nan built herself a fine castle in Spain, of which this unknown aunt was queen. Certainly her grandmother had now and then let fall a word about "your father's folks"—by and by they might come to see her!

The grape leaves were waving about in the warm wind, and they made a flickering light and shade upon the ground. The clematis was in bloom, and its soft white plumes fringed the archway of the lattice work. As the child looked down the garden walk it seemed very long and very beautiful to her. Her grandmother's flower-garden had been constantly encroached upon by the turf which surrounded it, until the snowberry bush, the London pride, the tiger-lilies, and the crimson phlox were like a besieged garrison.

Nan had already found plenty of wild flowers in the world; there were no entertainments provided for her except those the fields and pastures kindly spread before her admiring eyes. Old Mrs. Thacher had been brought up to consider the hard work of this life, and though she had taken her share of enjoyment as she went along, it was of a somewhat grim and sober sort. She believed that a certain amount of friskiness was as necessary to young human beings as it is to colts, but later both must be harnessed and made to work. As for pleasure itself she had little notion of that. She liked fair weather, and certain flowers were to her the decorations of certain useful plants, but if she had known that her grand-daughter could lie down beside the anemones and watch them move in the wind and nod their heads, and afterward look up into the blue sky to watch the great gulls above the river, or the sparrows flying low, or the crows who went higher, Mrs. Thacher would have understood almost nothing of such delights, and thought it a very idle way of spending one's time.

But as Nan sat in the old summer-house in the doctor's garden, she thought of many things that she must remember to tell her grandmother about this delightful day. The bees were humming in the vines, and as she looked down the wide garden-walk it seemed like the broad aisle in church, and the congregation of plants and bushes all looked at her as if she were in the pulpit. The church itself was not far away, and the windows were open, and sometimes Nan could hear the preacher's voice, and by and by the people began to sing, and she rose solemnly, as if it were her own parishioners in the garden who lifted up their voices. A cheerful robin began a loud solo in one of Dr. Leslie's cherry-trees, and the little girl laughed aloud in her make-believe meeting-house, and then the gate was opened and shut, and the doctor himself appeared, strolling along, and smiling as he came.

He was looking to the right and left at his flowers and trees, and once he stopped and took out his pocket knife to trim a straying branch of honeysuckle, which had wilted and died. When he came to the summer-house, he found his guest sitting there demurely with her hands folded in her lap. She had gathered some little sprigs of box and a few blossoms of periwinkle and late lilies of the valley, and they lay on the bench beside her. "So you did not go to church with Marilla?" the doctor said. "I dare say one sermon a day is enough for so small a person as you." For Nan's part, no sermon at all would have caused little sorrow, though she liked the excitement of the Sunday drive to the village. She only smiled when the doctor spoke, and gave a little sigh of satisfaction a minute afterward when he seated himself beside her.

"We must be off presently," he told her. "I have a long drive to take before night. I would let you go with me, but I am afraid I should keep you too long past your bedtime."

The little girl looked in his kind face appealingly; she could not bear to have the day come to an end. The doctor spoke to her as if she were grown up and understood everything, and this pleased her. It is very hard to be constantly reminded that one is a child, as if it were a crime against society. Dr. Leslie, unlike many others, did not like children because they were children; he now and then made friends with one, just as he added now and then to his narrow circle of grown friends. He felt a certain responsibility for this little girl, and congratulated himself upon feeling an instinctive fondness for her. The good old minister had said only that morning that love is the great motive power, that it is always easy to do things for those whom we love and wish to please, and for this reason we are taught to pray for love to God, and so conquer the difficulty of holiness. "But I must do my duty by her at any rate," the doctor told himself. "I am afraid I have forgotten the child somewhat in past years, and she is a bright little creature."

"Have you been taking good care of yourself?" he added aloud. "I was very tired, for I was out twice in the night taking care of sick people. But you must come to see me again some day. I dare say you and Marilla have made friends with each other. Now we must go, I suppose," and Nan Prince, still silent,—for the pleasure of this time was almost too great,—took hold of the doctor's outstretched hand, and they went slowly up the garden walk together. As they drove slowly down the street they met the people who were coming from church, and the child sat up very straight in the old gig, with her feet on the doctor's medicine-box, and was sure that everybody must be envying her. She thought it was more pleasant than ever that afternoon, as they passed through the open country outside the village; the fields and the trees were marvelously green, and the distant river was shining in the sun. Nan looked anxiously for the gray farmhouse for two or three minutes before they came in sight of it, but at last it showed itself, standing firm on the hillside. It seemed a long time since she had left home in the morning, but this beautiful day was to be one of the landmarks of her memory. Life had suddenly grown much larger, and her familiar horizon had vanished and she discovered a great distance stretching far beyond the old limits. She went gravely into the familiar kitchen, holding fast the bits of box and the periwinkle flowers, quite ready to answer her grandmother's questions, though she was only too certain that it would be impossible to tell any one the whole dear story of that June Sunday.

A little later, as Marilla came sedately home, she noticed in the driveway some fresh hoofmarks which pointed toward the street, and quickly assured herself that they could not have been made very long before. "I wonder what the two of 'em have been doing all the afternoon?" she said to herself. "She's a little lady, that child is; and it's a burnin' shame she should be left to run wild. I never set so much by her mother's looks as some did, but growin' things has blooms as much as they have roots and prickles—and even them Thachers will flower out once in a while."

VI
IN SUMMER WEATHER

One morning Dr. Leslie remembered an old patient whom he liked to go to see now and then, perhaps more from the courtesy and friendliness of the thing than from any hope of giving professional assistance. The old sailor, Captain Finch, had long before been condemned as unseaworthy, having suffered for many years from the effects of a bad fall on shipboard. He was a cheerful and wise person, and the doctor was much attached to him, besides knowing that he had borne his imprisonment with great patience, for his life on one of the most secluded farms of the region, surrounded by his wife's kinsfolk, who were all landsmen, could hardly be called anything else. The doctor had once made a voyage to Fayal and from thence to England in a sailing-vessel, having been somewhat delicate in health in his younger days, and this made him a more intelligent listener to the captain's stories than was often available.

Dr. Leslie had brought his case of medicines from mere force of habit, but by way of special prescription he had taken also a generous handful of his best cigars, and wrapped them somewhat clumsily in one of the large sheets of letter-paper which lay on his study table near by. Also he had stopped before the old sideboard in the carefully darkened dining-room, and taken a bottle of wine from one of its cupboards. "This will do him more good than anything, poor old fellow," he told himself, with a sudden warmth in his own heart and a feeling of grateful pleasure because he had thought of doing the kindness.

Marilla called eagerly from the kitchen window to ask where he was going, putting her hand out hastily to part the morning-glory vines, which had climbed their strings and twisted their stems together until they shut out the world from their planter's sight. But the doctor only answered that he should be back at dinner time, and settled himself comfortably in his carriage, smiling as he thought of Marilla's displeasure. She seldom allowed a secret to escape her, if she were once fairly on the scent of it, though she grumbled now, and told herself that she only cared to know for the sake of the people who might come, or to provide against the accident of his being among the missing in case of sudden need. She found life more interesting when there was even a small mystery to be puzzled over. It was impossible for Dr. Leslie to resist teasing his faithful hand-maiden once in a while, but he did it with proper gravity and respect, and their friendship was cemented by these sober jokes rather than torn apart.

The horse knew as well as his master that nothing of particular importance was in hand, and however well he always caught the spirit of the occasion when there was need for hurry, he now jogged along the road, going slowly where the trees cast a pleasant shade, and paying more attention to the flies than to anything else. The doctor seemed to be in deep thought, and old Major understood that no notice was to be taken of constant slight touches of the whip which his master held carelessly. It had been hot, dusty weather until the day and night before, when heavy showers had fallen; the country was looking fresh, and the fields and trees were washed clean at last from the white dust that had powdered them and given the farms a barren and discouraged look.

They had come in sight of Mrs. Thacher's house on its high hillside, and were just passing the abode of Mrs. Meeker, which was close by the roadside in the low land. This was a small, weather-beaten dwelling, and the pink and red hollyhocks showed themselves in fine array against its gray walls. Its mistress's prosaic nature had one most redeeming quality in her love for flowers and her gift in making them grow, and the doctor forgave her many things for the sake of the bright little garden in the midst of the sandy lands which surrounded her garden with their unshaded barrenness. The road that crossed these was hot in summer and swept by bitter winds in winter. It was like a bit of desert dropped by mistake among the green farms and spring-fed forests that covered the rest of the river uplands.

No sentinel was ever more steadfast to his duty in time of war and disorder than Mrs. Meeker, as she sat by the front window, from which she could see some distance either way along the crooked road. She was often absent from her own house to render assistance of one sort or another among her neighbors, but if she were at home it was impossible for man, woman, or child to go by without her challenge or careful inspection. She made couriers of her neighbors, and sent these errand men and women along the country roads or to the village almost daily. She was well posted in the news from both the village and the country side, and however much her acquaintances scolded about her, they found it impossible to resist the fascination of her conversation, and few declined to share in the banquet of gossip which she was always ready to spread. She was quick witted, and possessed of many resources and much cleverness of a certain sort; but it must be confessed that she had done mischief in her day, having been the murderer of more than one neighbor's peace of mind and the assailant of many a reputation. But if she were a dangerous inmate of one's household, few were so attractive or entertaining for the space of an afternoon visit, and it was usually said, when she was seen approaching, that she would be sure to have something to tell. Out in the country, where so many people can see nothing new from one week's end to the other, it is, after all, a great pleasure to have the latest particulars brought to one's door, as a townsman's newspaper is.

Mrs. Meeker knew better than to stop Dr. Leslie if he were going anywhere in a hurry; she had been taught this lesson years ago; but when she saw him journeying in such a leisurely way some instinct assured her of safety, and she came out of her door like a Jack-in-the-box, while old Major, only too ready for a halt, stood still in spite of a desperate twitch of the reins, which had as much effect as pulling at a fish-hook which has made fast to an anchor. Mrs. Meeker feigned a great excitement.

"I won't keep you but a moment," she said, "but I want to hear what you think about Mis' Thacher's chances."

"Mrs. Thacher's?" repeated the doctor, wonderingly.

"She's doing well, isn't she? I don't suppose that she will ever be a young woman again."

"I don't know why, but I took it for granted that you was goin' there," explained Mrs. Meeker, humbly. "She has seemed to me as if she was failing all summer. I was up there last night, and I never said so to her, but she had aged dreadfully. I wonder if it's likely she's had a light shock? Sometimes the fust one's kind o' hidden; comes by night or somethin', and folks don't know till they begins to feel the damage of it."

"She hasn't looked very well of late," said the doctor. For once in his life he was willing to have a friendly talk, Mrs. Meeker thought, and she proceeded to make the most of her opportunity.

"I think the care of that girl of Ad'line's has been too much for her all along," she announced, "she's wild as a hawk, and a perfect torment. One day she'll come strollin' in and beseechin' me for a bunch o' flowers, and the next she'll be here after dark scarin' me out o' my seven senses. She rigged a tick-tack here the other night against the window, and my heart was in my mouth. I thought 'twas a warnin' much as ever I thought anything in my life; the night before my mother died 'twas in that same room and against that same winder there came two or three raps, and my sister Drew and me we looked at each other, and turned cold all over, and mother set right up in bed the next night and looked at that winder and then laid back dead. I was all sole alone the other evenin',—Wednesday it was,—and when I heard them raps I mustered up, and went and put my head out o' the door, and I couldn't see nothing, and when I went back, knock—knock, it begun again, and I went to the door and harked. I hoped I should hear somebody or 'nother comin' along the road, and then I heard somethin' a rus'lin' amongst the sunflowers and hollyhocks, and then there was a titterin', and come to find out 'twas that young one. I chased her up the road till my wind give out, and I had to go and set on the stone wall, and come to. She won't go to bed till she's a mind to. One night I was up there this spring, and she never come in until after nine o'clock, a dark night, too; and the pore old lady was in distress, and thought she'd got into the river. I says to myself there wa'n't no such good news. She told how she'd be'n up into Jake an' Martin's oaks, trying to catch a little screech owl. She belongs with wild

creatur's, I do believe,—just the same natur'. She'd better be kept to school, 'stead o' growin' up this way; but she keeps the rest o' the young ones all in a brile, and this last teacher wouldn't have her there at all. She'd toll off half the school into the pasture at recess time, and none of 'em would get back for half an hour."

"What's a tick-tack? I don't remember," asked the doctor, who had been smiling now and then at this complaint.

"They tie a nail to the end of a string, and run it over a bent pin stuck in the sash, and then they get out o' sight and pull, and it clacks against the winder, don't ye see? Ain't it surprisin' how them devil's tricks gets handed down from gineration to gineration, while so much that's good is forgot," lamented Mrs. Meeker, but the doctor looked much amused.

"She's a bright child," he said, "and not over strong. I don't believe in keeping young folks shut up in the schoolhouses all summer long."

Mrs. Meeker sniffed disapprovingly. "She's tougher than ellum roots. I believe you can't kill them peakèd-looking young ones. She'll run like a fox all day long and live to see us all buried. I can put up with her pranks; 't is of pore old Mis' Thacher I'm thinkin'. She's had trouble enough without adding on this young 'scape-gallows. You had better fetch her up to be a doctor," Mrs. Meeker smilingly continued, "I was up there yisterday, and one of the young turkeys had come hoppin' and quawkin' round the doorsteps with its leg broke, and she'd caught it and fixed it off with a splint before you could say Jack Robi'son. She told how it was the way you'd done to Jim Finch that fell from the hay-rigging and broke his arm over to Jake an' Martin's, haying time."

"I remember she was standing close by, watching everything I did," said the doctor, his face shining with interest and pleasure. "I shall have to carry her about for clerk. Her father studied medicine you know. It is the most amazing thing how people inherit"—but he did not finish his sentence and pulled the reins so quickly that the wise horse knew there was no excuse for not moving forward.

Mrs. Meeker had hoped for a longer interview. "Stop as you come back, won't you?" she asked. "I'm goin' to pick you some of the handsomest poppies I ever raised. I got the seed from my sister-in-law's cousin, she that was 'Miry Gregg, and they do beat everything. They wilt so that it ain't no use to pick 'em now, unless you was calc'latin' to come home by the other road. There's nobody sick about here, is there?" to which the doctor returned a shake of the head and the information that he should be returning that way about noon. As he drove up the hill he assured himself with great satisfaction that he believed he hadn't told anything that morning which would be repeated all over town before night, while his hostess returned to her house quite dissatisfied with the interview, though she hoped for better fortune on Dr. Leslie's return.

For his part, he drove on slowly past the Thacher farmhouse, looking carefully about him, and sending a special glance up the lane in search of the invalid turkey. "I should like to see how she managed it," he told himself half aloud. "If she shows a gift for such things I'll take pains to teach her a lesson or two by and by when she is older.... Come Major, don't go to sleep on the road!" and in a few minutes the wagon was out of sight, if the reader had stood in the Thacher lane, instead of following the good man farther on his errand of mercy and good fellowship.

At that time in the morning most housekeepers were busy in their kitchens, but Mrs. Thacher came to stand in her doorway, and shaded her forehead and eyes with her hand from the bright sunlight, as she looked intently across the pastures toward the river. She seemed anxious and glanced to and fro across the fields, and presently she turned quickly at the sound of a footstep, and saw her young grand-daughter coming from the other direction round the corner of the house. The child was wet and a little pale, though she evidently had been running.

"What have you been doin' now?" asked the old lady fretfully. "I won't have you gettin' up in the mornin' before I am awake and stealin' out of the house. I think you are drowned in the river or

have broken your neck fallin' out of a tree. Here it is after ten o'clock. I've a mind to send you to bed, Nanny; who got you out of the water, for in it you've been sure enough?"

"I got out myself," said the little girl. "It was deep, though," and she began to cry, and when she tried to cover her eyes with her already well-soaked little apron, she felt quite broken-hearted and unnerved, and sat down dismally on the doorstep.

"Come in, and put on a dry dress," said her grandmother, not unkindly; "that is, if there's anything but your Sunday one fit to be seen. I've told you often enough not to go playin' in the river, and I've wanted you more than common to go out to Jake and Martin's to borrow me a little cinnamon. You're a real trial this summer. I believe the bigger you are the worse you are. Now just say what you've been about. I declare I shall have to go and have a talk with the doctor, and he'll scold you well. I'm gettin' old and I can't keep after you; you ought to consider me some. You'll think of it when you see me laying dead, what a misery you've be'n. No schoolin' worth namin';" grumbled Mrs. Thacher, as she stepped heavily to and fro in the kitchen, and the little girl disappeared within the bed-room. In a few minutes, however, her unusual depression was driven away by the comfort of dry garments, and she announced triumphantly that she had found a whole flock of young wild ducks, and that she had made a raft and chased them about up and down the river, until the raft had proved unseaworthy, and she had fallen through into the water. Later in the day somebody came from the Jake and Martin homesteads to say that there must be no more pulling down of the ends of the pasture fences. The nails had easily let go their hold of the old boards, and a stone had served our heroine for a useful shipwright's hammer, but the young cattle had strayed through these broken barriers and might have done great damage if they had been discovered a little later,—having quickly hied themselves to a piece of carefully cultivated land. The Jake and Martin families regarded Nan with a mixture of dread and affection. She was bringing a new element into their prosaic lives, and her pranks afforded them a bit of news almost daily. Her imagination was apt to busy itself in inventing tales of her unknown aunt, with which she entertained a grandchild of Martin Dyer, a little girl of nearly her own age. It seemed possible to Nan that any day a carriage drawn by a pair of prancing black horses might be seen turning up the lane, and that a lovely lady might alight and claim her as her only niece. Why this event had not already taken place the child never troubled herself to think, but ever since Marilla had spoken of this aunt's existence, the dreams of her had been growing longer and more charming, until she seemed fit for a queen, and her unseen house a palace. Nan's playmate took pleasure in repeating these glowing accounts to her family, and many were the head-shakings and evil forebodings over the untruthfulness of the heroine of this story. Little Susan Dyer's only aunt, who was well known to her, lived as other people did in a comparatively plain and humble house, and it was not to be wondered at that she objected to hearing continually of an aunt of such splendid fashion. And yet Nan tried over and over again to be in some degree worthy of the relationship. She must not be too unfit to enter upon more brilliant surroundings whenever the time should come,—she took care that her pet chickens and her one doll should have high-sounding names, such as would seem proper to the aunt, and, more than this, she took a careful survey of the house whenever she was coming home from school or from play, lest she might come upon her distinguished relative unawares. She had asked her grandmother more than once to tell her about this mysterious kinswoman, but Mrs. Thacher proved strangely uncommunicative, fearing if she answered one easy question it might involve others that were more difficult.

The good woman grew more and more anxious to fulfil her duty to this troublesome young housemate; the child was strangely dear and companionable in spite of her frequent naughtiness. It seemed, too, as if she could do whatever she undertook, and as if she had a power which made her able to use and unite the best traits of her ancestors, the strong capabilities which had been illy balanced or allowed to run to waste in others. It might be said that the materials for a fine specimen of humanity accumulate through several generations, until a child appears who is the heir of all the family wit and attractiveness and common sense, just as one person may inherit the worldly wealth of his ancestry.

VII
FOR THE YEARS TO COME

Late one summer afternoon Dr. Leslie was waked from an unusually long after-dinner nap by Marilla's footsteps along the hall. She remained standing in the doorway, looking at him for a provoking length of time, and finally sneezed in her most obtrusive and violent manner. At this he sat up quickly and demanded to be told what was the matter, adding that he had been out half the night before, which was no news to the faithful housekeeper.

"There, I'm sure I didn't mean to wake you up," she said, with an apparent lack of self-reproach. "I never can tell whether you are asleep or only kind of drowsin'. There was a boy here just now from old Mis' Cunningham's over on the b'ilin' spring road. They want you to come over quick as convenient. She don't know nothin', the boy said."

"Never did," grumbled the doctor. "I'll go, toward night, but I can't do her any good."

"An' Mis' Thacher is out here waitin' too, but she says if you're busy she'll go along to the stores and stop as she comes back. She looks to me as if she was breakin' up," confided Marilla in a lower tone.

"Tell her I'm ready now," answered the doctor in a more cordial tone, and though he said half to himself and half to Marilla that here was another person who expected him to cure old age, he spoke compassionately, and as if his heart were heavy with the thought of human sorrow and suffering. But he greeted Mrs. Thacher most cheerfully, and joked about Marilla's fear of a fly, as he threw open the blinds of the study window which was best shaded from the sun.

Mrs. Thacher did indeed look changed, and the physician's quick eyes took note of it, and, as he gathered up some letters and newspapers which had been strewn about just after dinner, he said kindly that he hoped she had no need of a doctor. It was plain that the occasion seemed an uncommon one to her. She wore her best clothes, which would not have been necessary for one of her usual business trips to the village, and it seemed to be difficult for her to begin her story. Dr. Leslie, taking a purely professional view of the case, began to consider what form of tonic would be most suitable, whether she had come to ask for one or not.

"I want to have a good talk with you about the little gell; Nanny, you know;" she said at last, and the doctor nodded, and, explaining that there seemed to be a good deal of draught through the room, crossed the floor and gently shut the door which opened into the hall. He smiled a little as he did it, having heard the long breath outside which was the not unfamiliar signal of Marilla's presence. If she were curious, she was a discreet keeper of secrets, and the doctor had more than once indulged her in her sinful listening by way of friendliness and reward. But this subject promised to concern his own affairs too closely, and he became wary of the presence of another pair of ears. He was naturally a man of uncommon reserve, and most loyal in keeping his patients' secrets. If clergymen knew their congregations as well as physicians do, the sermons would be often more closely related to the parish needs. It was difficult for the world to understand why, when Dr. Leslie was anything but prone to gossip, Marilla should have been possessed of such a wealth of knowledge of her neighbors' affairs. Strange to say this wealth was for her own miserly pleasure and not to be distributed, and while she often proclaimed with exasperating triumph that she had known for months some truth just discovered by others, she was regarded by her acquaintances as if she were a dictionary written in some foreign language; immensely valuable, but of no practical use to themselves. It was sometimes difficult not to make an attempt to borrow from her store of news, but nothing delighted her more than to be so approached, and to present impenetrable barriers of discretion to the enemy.

"How is Nanny getting on?" the doctor asked. "She looks stronger than she did a year ago."

"Dear me, she's wild as ever," answered Mrs. Thacher, trying to smile; "but I've been distressed about her lately, night and day. I thought perhaps I might see you going by. She's gettin' to be a great

girl, doctor, and I ain't fit to cope with her. I find my strength's a-goin', and I'm old before my time; all my folks was rugged and sound long past my age, but I've had my troubles—you don't need I should tell you that! Poor Ad'line always give me a feelin' as if I was a hen that has hatched ducks. I never knew exactly how to do for her, she seemed to see everything so different, and Lord only knows how I worry about her; and al'ays did, thinkin' if I'd seen clearer how to do my duty her life might have come out sort of better. And it's the same with little Anna; not that she's so prone to evil as some; she's a lovin'-hearted child if ever one was born, but she's a piece o' mischief; and it may come from her father's folks and their ways o' livin', but she's made o' different stuff, and I ain't fit to make answer for her, or for fetchin' of her up. I come to ask if you won't kindly advise what's best for her. I do' know's anything's got to be done for a good spell yet. I mind what you say about lettin' her run and git strong, and I don't check her. Only it seemed to me that you might want to speak about her sometimes and not do it for fear o' wronging my judgment. I declare I haven't no judgment about what's reasonable for her, and you're her guardeen, and there's the money her father's sister has sent her; 't would burn my fingers to touch a cent of it, but by and by if you think she ought to have schoolin' or anything else you must just say so."

"I think nothing better could have been done for the child than you have done," said Dr. Leslie warmly. "Don't worry yourself, my good friend. As for books, she will take to them of her own accord quite soon enough, and in such weather as this I think one day in the fields is worth five in the schoolhouse. I'll do the best I can for her."

Mrs. Thacher's errand had not yet been told, though she fumbled in her pocket and walked to the open window to look for the neighbor's wagon by which she was to find conveyance home, before she ventured to say anything more. "I don't know's my time'll come for some years yet," she said at length, falteringly, "but I have had it borne in upon my mind a good many ways this summer that I ain't going to stay here a gre't while. I've been troubled considerable by the same complaints that carried my mother off, and I'm built just like her. I don't feel no concern for myself, but it's goin' to leave the child without anybody of her own to look to. There's plenty will befriend her just so long as she's got means, and the old farm will sell for something besides what she's got already, but that ain't everything, and I can't seem to make up my mind to havin' of her boarded about. If 't was so your wife had lived I should know what I'd go down on my knees to her to do, but I can't ask it of you to be burdened with a young child a-growin' up."

The doctor listened patiently, though just before this he had risen and begun to fill a small bottle at the closet shelves, which were stocked close to their perilous edges with various drugs. Without turning to look at his patient he said, "I wish you would take five or six drops of this three times a day, and let me see you again within a week or two." And while the troubled woman turned to look at him with half-surprise, he added, "Don't give yourself another thought about little Nan. If anything should happen to you, I shall be glad to bring her here, and to take care of her as if she were my own. I always have liked her, and it will be as good for me as for her. I would not promise it for any other child, but if you had not spoken to-day, I should have found a way to arrange with you the first chance that came. But I'm getting to be an old fellow myself," he laughed. "I suppose if I get through first you will be friendly to Marilla?" and Mrs. Thacher let a faint sunbeam of a smile shine out from the depths of the handkerchief with which she was trying to stop a great shower of tears. Marilla was not without her little vanities, and being thought youthful was one of the chief desires of her heart.

So Mrs. Thacher went away lighter hearted than she came. She asked the price of the vial of medicine, and was answered that they would talk about that another time; then there was a little sober joking about certain patients who never paid their doctor's bills at all because of a superstition that they would immediately require his aid again. Dr. Leslie stood in his study doorway and watched her drive down the street with Martin Dyer. It seemed to him only a year or two since both the man and woman had been strong and vigorous; now they both looked shrunken, and there was a wornness and feebleness about the bodies which had done such good service. "Come and go," said the doctor to

himself, "one generation after another. Getting old! all the good old-fashioned people on the farms: I never shall care so much to be at the beck and call of their grandchildren, but I must mend up these old folks and do the best I can for them as long as they stay; they're good friends to me. Dear me, how it used to fret me when I was younger to hear them always talking about old Doctor Wayland and what he used to do; and here I am the old doctor myself!" And then he went down the gravel walk toward the stable with a quick, firm step, which many a younger man might have envied, to ask for a horse. "You may saddle him," he directed. "I am only going to old Mrs. Cunningham's, and it is a cool afternoon."

Dr. Leslie had ridden less and less every year of his practice; but, for some reason best known to himself, he went down the village street at a mad pace. Indeed, almost everybody who saw him felt that it was important to go to the next house to ask if it were known for what accident or desperate emergency he had been called away.

VIII
A GREAT CHANGE

Until the autumn of this year, life had seemed to flow in one steady, unchanging current. The thought had not entered little Nan Prince's head that changes might be in store for her, for, ever since she could remember, the events of life had followed each other quietly, and except for the differences in every-day work and play, caused by the succession of the seasons, she was not called upon to accommodate herself to new conditions. It was a gentle change at first: as the days grew shorter and the house and cellar were being made ready for winter, her grandmother seemed to have much more to do than usual, and Nan must stay at home to help. She was growing older at any rate; she knew how to help better than she used; she was anxious to show her grandmother how well she could work, and as the river side and the windy pastures grew less hospitable, she did not notice that she was no longer encouraged to go out to play for hours together to amuse herself as best she might, and at any rate keep out of the way. It seemed natural enough now that she should stay in the house, and be entrusted with some regular part of the business of keeping it. For some time Mrs. Thacher had kept but one cow, and early in November, after a good offer for old Brindle had been accepted, it was announced to Nan's surprise that the young cow which was to be Brindle's successor need not be bought until spring; she would be a great care in winter time, and Nan was to bring a quart of milk a day from Jake and Martin's. This did not seem an unpleasant duty while the mild weather lasted; if there came a rainy day, one of the kind neighbors would leave the little pail on his way to the village before the young messenger had started out.

Nan could not exactly understand at last why Mrs. Jake and Mrs. Martin always asked about her grandmother every morning with so much interest and curiosity, or why they came oftener and oftener to help with the heavy work. Mrs. Thacher had never before minded her occasional illnesses so much, and some time passed before Nan's inexperienced eyes and fearless young heart understood that the whole atmosphere which overhung the landscape of her life had somehow changed, that another winter approached full of mystery and strangeness and discomfort of mind, and at last a great storm was almost ready to break into the shelter and comfort of her simple life. Poor Nan! She could not think what it all meant. She was asked many a distressing question, and openly pitied, and heard her future discussed, as if her world might come to an end any day. The doctor had visited her grandmother from time to time, but always while she was at school, until vacation came, and poor Mrs. Thacher grew too feeble to enter into even a part of the usual business of the farmhouse.

One morning, as Nan was coming back from the Dyer farm with the milk, she met Mrs. Meeker in the highway. This neighbor and our heroine were rarely on good terms with each other, since Nan had usually laid herself under some serious charge of wrong-doing, and had come to believe that she would be disapproved in any event, and so might enjoy life as she chose, and revel in harmless malice.

The child could not have told why she shrank from meeting her enemy so much more than usual, and tried to discover some refuge or chance for escape; but, as it was an open bit of the road, and a straight way to the lane, she could have no excuse for scrambling over the stone wall and cutting short the distance. However, her second thought scorned the idea of running away in such cowardly fashion, and not having any recent misdemeanor on her conscience, she went forward unflinchingly.

Mrs. Meeker's tone was not one of complaint, but of pity, and insinuating friendliness. "How's your grandma to-day?" she asked, and Nan, with an unsympathetic answer of "About the same," stepped bravely forward, resenting with all her young soul the discovery that Mrs. Meeker had turned and was walking alongside.

"She's been a good, kind grandma to you, hain't she?" said this unwelcome companion, and when Nan had returned a wondering but almost inaudible assent, she continued, "She'll be a great loss to you, I can tell you. You'll never find nobody to do for you like her. There, you won't realize

nothing about it till you've got older'n you be now; but the time'll come when"—and her sharp voice faltered; for Nan had turned to look full in her face, had stopped still in the frozen road, dropped the pail unconsciously and given a little cry, and in another moment was running as a chased wild creature does toward the refuge of its nest. The doctor's horse was fastened at the head of the lane, and Nan knew at last, what any one in the neighborhood could have told her many days before, that her grandmother was going to die. Mrs. Meeker stared after her with a grieved sense of the abrupt ending of the coveted interview, then she recovered her self-possession, and, picking up the forsaken pail, stepped lightly over the ruts and frozen puddles, following Nan eagerly in the hope of witnessing more of such extraordinary behavior, and with the design of offering her services as watcher or nurse in these last hours. At any rate the pail and the milk, which had not been spilt, could not be left in the road.

So the first chapter of the child's life was ended in the early winter weather. There was a new unsheltered grave on the slope above the river, the farm-house door was shut and locked, and the light was out in the kitchen window. It had been a landmark to those who were used to driving along the road by night, and there were sincere mourners for the kindly woman who had kept a simple faith and uprightness all through her long life of trouble and disappointment. Nan and the cat had gone to live in the village, and both, being young, had taken the change with serenity; though at first a piteous sorrow had been waked in the child's heart, a keen and dreadful fear of the future. The past seemed so secure and pleasant, as she looked back, and now she was in the power of a fateful future which had begun with something like a whirlwind that had swept over her, leaving nothing unchanged. It seemed to her that this was to be incessant, and that being grown up was to be at the mercy of sorrow and uncertainty. She was pale and quiet during her last days in the old home, answering questions and obeying directions mechanically; but usually sitting in the least visited part of the kitchen, watching the neighbors as they examined her grandmother's possessions, and properly disposed of the contents of the house. Sometimes a spark flew from her sad and angry eyes, but she made no trouble, and seemed dull and indifferent. Late in the evening Dr. Leslie carried her home with him through the first heavy snow-storm of the year, and between the excitement of being covered from the fast-falling flakes, and so making a journey in the dark, and of keeping hold of the basket which contained the enraged kitten, the grief at leaving home was not dwelt upon.

When she had been unwound from one of the doctor's great cloaks, and her eyes had grown used to the bright light in the dining-room, and Marilla had said that supper had been waiting half an hour, and she did not know how she should get along with a black cat, and then bustled about talking much faster than usual, because the sight of the lonely child had made her ready to cry, Nan began to feel comforted. It seemed a great while ago that she had cried at her grandmother's funeral. If this were the future it was certainly very welcome and already very dear, and the time of distress was like a night of bad dreams between two pleasant days.

It will easily be understood that no great change was made in Dr. Leslie's house. The doctor himself and Marilla were both well settled in their habits, and while they cordially made room for the little girl who was to be the third member of the household, her coming made little difference to either of her elders. There was a great deal of illness that winter, and the doctor was more than commonly busy; Nan was sent to school, and discovered the delight of reading one stormy day when her guardian had given her leave to stay at home, and she had found his own old copy of Robinson Crusoe looking most friendly and inviting in a corner of one of the study shelves. As for school, she had never liked it, and the village school gave her far greater misery than the weather-beaten building at the cross-roads ever had done. She had known many of the village children by sight, from seeing them in church, but she did not number many friends among them, even after the winter was nearly gone and the days began to grow brighter and less cold, and the out-of-door games were a source of great merriment in the playground. Nan's ideas of life were quite unlike those held by these new acquaintances, and she could not gain the least interest in most of the other children, though she grew fond of one boy

who was a famous rover and fisherman, and after one of the elder girls had read a composition which fired our heroine's imagination, she worshiped this superior being from a suitable distance, and was her willing adorer and slave. The composition was upon The Moon, and when the author proclaimed the fact that this was the same moon which had looked down upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, little Nan's eyes had opened wide with reverence and awe, and she opened the doors of her heart and soul to lofty thought and high imagination. The big girl, who sat in the back seat and glibly recited amazing lessons in history, and did sums which entirely covered the one small blackboard, was not unmindful of Nan's admiration, and stolidly accepted and munched the offerings of cracked nuts, or of the treasured English apples which had been brought from the farm and kept like a squirrel's hoard in an archway of the cellar by themselves. Nan cherished an idea of going back to the farm to live by herself as soon as she grew a little older, and she indulged in pleasing day-dreams of a most charming life there, with frequent entertainments for her friends, at which the author of the information about the moon would be the favored guest, and Nan herself, in a most childish and provincial fashion, the reigning queen. What did these new town-acquaintances know of the strawberries which grew in the bit of meadow, or the great high-bush blackberries by one of the pasture walls, and what would their pleasure be when they were taken down the river some moonlight night and caught sight of a fire blazing on a distant bank, and went nearer to find a sumptuous feast which Nan herself had arranged? She had been told that her aunt—that mysterious and beneficent aunt—had already sent her money which was lying idle in the bank until she should need to spend it, and her imaginary riches increased week by week, while her horizon of future happiness constantly grew wider.

The other children were not unwilling at first to enter upon an inquisitive friendship with the new-comer; but Marilla was so uncongenial to the noisy visitors, and so fastidious in the matter of snowy and muddy shoes, that she was soon avoided. Nan herself was a teachable child and gave little trouble, and Marilla sometimes congratulated herself because she had reserved the violent objections which had occurred to her mind when the doctor had announced, just before Mrs. Thacher's death, that his ward would henceforth find a home in his house.

Marilla usually sat in the dining-room in the evening, though she was apt to visit the study occasionally, knitting in hand, to give her opinions, or to acquaint herself with various events of which she thought the doctor would be likely to have knowledge. Sometimes in the colder winter nights, she drew a convenient light-stand close beside the kitchen stove and refused to wander far from such comfortable warmth. Now that she had Nan's busy feet to cover, there was less danger than ever that she should be left without knitting-work, and she deeply enjoyed the child's company, since Nan could give innocent answers to many questions which could never be put to elder members of the Dyer and Thacher neighborhood. Mrs. Meeker was apt to be discussed with great freedom, and Nan told long stories about her own childish experiences, which were listened to and encouraged, and matched with others even longer and more circumstantial by Marilla. The doctor, who was always reading when he could find a quiet hour for himself, often smiled as he heard the steady sound of voices from the wide kitchen, and he more than once took a few careful steps into the dining-room, and stood there shaking with laughter at the character of the conversation. Nan, though eager to learn, and curious about many things in life and nature, at first found her school lessons difficult, and sometimes came appealingly to him for assistance, when circumstances had made a temporary ending of her total indifference to getting the lessons at all. For this and other reasons she sometimes sought the study, and drew a small chair beside the doctor's large one before the blazing fire of the black birch logs; and then Marilla in her turn would venture upon the neutral ground between study and kitchen, and smile with satisfaction at the cheerful companionship of the tired man and the idle little girl who had already found her way to his lonely heart. Nan had come to another home; there was no question about what should be done with her and for her, but she was made free of the silent old house, and went on growing taller, and growing dearer, and growing happier day by day. Whatever the future might bring, she would be sure to look back with love and longing to the first summer of her village

life, when, seeing that she looked pale and drooping, the doctor, to her intense gratification, took her away from school. Presently, instead of having a ride out into the country as an occasional favor, she might be seen every day by the doctor's side, as if he could not make his morning rounds without her; and in and out of the farm-houses she went, following him like a little dog, or, as Marilla scornfully expressed it, a briar at his heels; sitting soberly by when he dealt his medicines and gave advice, listening to his wise and merry talk with some, and his helpful advice and consolation to others of the country people. Many of these acquaintances treated Nan with great kindness; she half belonged to them, and was deeply interesting for the sake of her other ties of blood and bonds of fortune, while she took their courtesy with thankfulness, and their lack of notice with composure. If there were a shiny apple offered she was glad, but if not, she did not miss it, since her chief delight was in being the doctor's assistant and attendant, and her eyes were always watching for chances when she might be of use. And one day, coming out from a bedroom, the doctor discovered, to his amusement, that her quick and careful fingers had folded the papers of some powders which he had left unfolded on the table. As they drove home together in the bright noon sunshine, he said, as if the question were asked for the sake of joking a little, "What are you going to do when you grow up, Nan?" to which she answered gravely, as if it were the one great question of her life, "I should like best to be a doctor." Strangely enough there flitted through the doctor's mind a remembrance of the day when he had talked with Mrs. Meeker, and had looked up the lane to see the unlucky turkey whose leg had been put into splints. He had wished more than once that he had taken pains to see how the child had managed it; but old Mrs. Thacher had reported the case to have been at least partially successful.

Nan had stolen a look at her companion after the answer had been given, but had been pleased and comforted to find that he was not laughing at her, and at once began a lively picture of becoming famous in her chosen profession, and the valued partner of Dr. Leslie, whose skill everybody praised so heartily. He should not go out at night, and she would help him so much that he would wonder how he ever had been able to manage his wide-spread practice alone. It was a matter of no concern to her that Marilla had laughed when she had been told of Nan's intentions, and had spoken disrespectfully of women doctors; and the child's heart was full of pride and hope. The doctor stopped his horse suddenly to show Nan some flowers which grew at the roadside, some brilliant cardinals, and she climbed quickly down to gather them. There was an unwritten law that they should keep watch, one to the right hand, and the other to the left, and such treasures of blossoms or wild fruit seldom escaped Nan's vision. Now she felt as if she had been wrong to let her thoughts go wandering, and her cheeks were almost as bright as the scarlet flowers themselves, as she clambered back to the wagon seat. But the doctor was in deep thought, and had nothing more to say for the next mile or two. It had become like a bad-case day suddenly and without apparent reason; but Nan had no suspicion that she was the patient in charge whose welfare seemed to the doctor to be dependent upon his own decisions.

IX
AT DR. LESLIE'S

That evening Dr. Leslie made signs that he was not to be interrupted, and even shut the study doors, to which precaution he seldom resorted. He was evidently disturbed when an hour later a vigorous knocking was heard at the seldom-used front entrance, and Marilla ushered in with anything but triumph an elderly gentleman who had been his college classmate. Marilla's countenance wore a forbidding expression, and as she withdrew she took pains to shut the door between the hall and dining-room with considerable violence. It was almost never closed under ordinary circumstances, but the faithful housekeeper was impelled to express her wrath in some way, and this was the first that offered itself. Nan was sitting peacefully in the kitchen playing with her black cat and telling herself stories no doubt, and was quite unprepared for Marilla's change of temper. The bell for the Friday evening prayer-meeting was tolling its last strokes and it was Marilla's habit to attend that service. She was apt to be kept closely at home, it must be acknowledged, and this was one of her few social indulgences. Since Nan had joined the family and proved that she could be trusted with a message, she had been left in charge of the house during this coveted hour on Friday evenings.

Marilla had descended from her room arrayed for church going, but now her bonnet was pulled off as if that were the prime offender, and when the child looked wonderingly around the kitchen, she saw the bread-box brought out from the closet and put down very hard on a table, while Marilla began directly afterward to rattle at the stove.

"I'd like to say to some folks that we don't keep hotel," grumbled the good woman, "I wish to my heart I'd stepped right out o' the front door and gone straight to meetin' and left them there beholdin' of me. Course he hasn't had no supper, nor dinner neither like's not, and if men are ever going to drop down on a family unexpected it's always Friday night when everything's eat up that ever was in the house. I s'pose, after I bake double quantities to-morrow mornin', he'll be drivin' off before noon-time, and treasure it up that we never have nothin' decent to set before folks. Anna, you've got to stir yourself and help, while I get the fire started up; lay one o' them big dinner napkins over the red cloth, and set a plate an' a tea-cup, for as for laying the whole table over again, I won't and I shan't. There's water to cart upstairs and the bed-room to open, but Heaven be thanked I was up there dustin' to-day, and if ever you set a mug of flowers into one o' the spare-rooms again and leave it there a week or ten days to spile, I'll speak about it to the doctor. Now you step out o' my way like a good girl. I don't know whether you or the cat's the worst for gettin' before me when I'm in a drive. I'll set him out somethin' to eat, and then I'm goin' to meetin' if the skies fall."

Nan meekly obeyed directions, and with a sense of guilt concerning the deserted posies went to hover about the study door after the plates were arranged, instead of braving further the stormy atmosphere of the kitchen. Marilla's lamp had shone in so that there had been light enough in the dining-room, but the study was quite dark except where there was one spark at the end of the doctor's half-finished cigar, which was alternately dim and bright like the revolving lantern of a lighthouse.

At that moment the smoker rose, and with his most considerate and conciliatory tone asked Marilla for the study lamp, but Nan heard, and ran on tiptoe and presently brought it in from the kitchen, holding it carefully with both hands and walking slowly. She apparently had no thought beyond her errand, but she was brimful of eagerness to see the unexpected guest; for guests were by no means frequent, and since she had really become aware of a great outside world beyond the boundaries of Oldfields she welcomed the sight of any messengers.

Dr. Leslie hastily pushed away some books from the lamp's place; and noticing that his visitor looked at Nan with surprise, quickly explained that this little girl had come to take care of him, and bade Nan speak to Dr. Ferris. Whereupon her bravery was sorely tried, but not overcome, and afterward she sat down in her own little chair, quite prepared to be hospitable. As she heard a sound

of water being poured into a pitcher in the best room upstairs, she was ready to laugh if there had been anybody to laugh with, and presently Marilla appeared at the door with the announcement that there was some tea waiting in the dining-room, after which and before anybody had thought of moving, the side gate clacked resolutely, and Marilla, looking more prim and unruffled than usual, sped forth to the enjoyment of her Friday evening privileges.

Nan followed the gentlemen to the dining-room not knowing whether she were wanted or not, but feeling quite assured when it was ascertained that neither sugar nor teaspoons had been provided. The little feast looked somewhat meagre, and the doctor spoke irreverently of his housekeeper and proceeded to abstract a jar of her best strawberry jam from the convenient store-closet, and to collect other articles of food which seemed to him to be inviting, however inappropriate to the occasion. The guest would have none of the jam, but Dr. Leslie cut a slice of the loaf of bread for himself and one for Nan, though it had already waned beyond its last quarter, and nobody knew what would happen if there were no toast at breakfast time. Marilla would never know what a waste of jam was spread upon these slices either, but she was a miser only with the best preserves, and so our friends reveled in their stolen pleasure, and were as merry together as heart could wish.

Nan thought it very strange when she found that the doctor and his guest had been at school together, for the stranger seemed so old and worn. They were talking about other classmates at first, and she sat still to listen, until the hour of Marilla's return drew near and Dr. Leslie prudently returned to his own uninvaded apartment. Nan was told, to her sorrow, that it was past her bed-time and as she stopped to say good-night, candle in hand, a few moments afterward, the doctor stooped to kiss her with unusual tenderness, and a little later, when she was safe in her small bedroom and under the coverlet which was Marilla's glory, having been knit the winter before in an intricate pattern, she almost shook with fear at the sound of its maker's vengeful footsteps in the lower room. It is to be hoped that the influence of the meeting had been very good, and that one of its attendants had come home equal to great demands upon her fortitude and patience. Nan could not help wishing she had thought to put away the jam, and she wondered how Marilla would treat them all in the morning. But, to do that worthy woman justice, she was mild and considerate, and outdid herself in the breakfast that was set forth in the guest's honor, and Dr. Ferris thought he could do no less than to add to his morning greeting the question why she was not growing old like the rest of them, which, though not answered, was pleasantly received.

The host and guest talked very late the night before, and told each other many things. Dr. Leslie had somewhat unwillingly undertaken the country practice which had grown dearer to him with every year, but there were family reasons why he had decided to stay in Oldfields for a few months at least, and though it was not long before he was left alone, not only by the father and mother whose only child he was, but by his wife and child, he felt less and less inclination to break the old ties and transplant himself to some more prominent position of the medical world. The leisure he often had at certain seasons of the year was spent in the studies which always delighted him, and little by little he gained great repute among his professional brethren. He was a scholar and a thinker in other than medical philosophies, and most persons who knew anything of him thought it a pity that he should be burying himself alive, as they were pleased to term his devotion to his provincial life. His rare excursions to the cities gave more pleasure to other men than to himself, however, in these later years, and he laughingly proclaimed himself to be growing rusty and behind the times to Dr. Ferris, who smiled indulgently, and did not take the trouble to contradict so untrue and preposterous an assertion.

If one man had been a stayer at home; a vegetable nature, as Dr. Leslie had gone on to say, which has no power to change its locality or to better itself by choosing another and more adequate or stimulating soil; the other had developed the opposite extreme of character, being by nature a rover. From the medical school he had entered at once upon the duties of a naval appointment, and after he had become impatient of its routine of practice and its check upon his freedom, he had gone, always with some sufficient and useful object, to one far country after another. Lately he had spent an unusual

number of consecutive months in Japan, which was still unfamiliar even to most professional travelers, and he had come back to America enthusiastic and full of plans for many enterprises which his shrewd, but not very persistent brain had conceived. The two old friends were delighted to see each other, but they took this long-deferred meeting as calmly as if they were always next-door neighbors. It was a most interesting thing that while they led such different lives and took such apparently antagonistic routes of progression, they were pretty sure to arrive at the same conclusion, though it might appear otherwise to a listener who knew them both slightly.

"And who is the little girl?" asked Dr. Ferris, who had refused his entertainer's cigars and produced a pipe from one pocket, after having drawn a handful of curious small jade figures from another and pushed them along the edge of the study table, without comment, for his friend to look at. Some of them were so finely carved that they looked like a heap of grotesque insects struggling together as they lay there, but though Dr. Leslie's eyes brightened as he glanced at them, he gave no other sign of interest at that time, and answered his guest's question instead.

"She is a ward of mine," he said; "she was left quite alone by the death of her grandmother some months ago, and so I brought her here."

"It isn't often that I forget a face," said Dr. Ferris, "but I have been trying to think what association I can possibly have with that child. I remember at last; she looks like a young assistant surgeon who was on the old frigate Fortune with me just before I left the service. I don't think he was from this part of the country though; I never heard what became of him."

"I dare say it was her father; I believe he made a voyage or two," said Dr. Leslie, much interested. "Do you know anything more about him? you always remember everything, Ferris."

"Yes," answered the guest, slowly puffing away at his pipe. "Yes, he was a very bright fellow, with a great gift at doctoring, but he was willful, full of queer twists and fancies, the marry in haste and repent at his leisure sort of young man."

"Exactly what he did, I suppose," interrupted the host. "Only his leisure was fortunately postponed to the next world, for the most part; he died very young."

"I used to think it a great pity that he had not settled himself ashore in a good city practice," continued Dr. Ferris. "He had a great knack at pleasing people and making friends, and he was always spoiling for want of work. I was ready enough to shirk my part of that, you may be sure, but if you start with a reasonably healthy set of men, crew and officers, and keep good discipline, and have no accidents on the voyage, an old-fashioned ship-master's kit of numbered doses is as good as anything on board a man-of-war in time of peace. You have mild cases that result from over-heating or over-eating, and sometimes a damaged finger to dress, or a tooth to pull. I used to tell young Prince that it was a pity one of the men wouldn't let himself be chopped to pieces and fitted together again to give us a little amusement."

"That's the name," announced Nan's guardian with great satisfaction. "This is a very small world; we are all within hail of each other. I dare say when we get to Heaven there will not be a stranger to make friends with."

"I could give you more wonderful proofs of that than you would be likely to believe," responded the surgeon. "But tell me how you happened to have anything to do with the child; did Prince wander into this neighborhood?"

"Not exactly, but he fell in love with a young girl who was brought up on one of the farms just out of the village. She was a strange character, a handsome creature, with a touch of foolish ambition, and soon grew impatient of the routine of home life. I believe that she went away at first to work in one of the factories in Lowell, and afterward she drifted to Dunport, where young Prince's people lived, and I dare say it was when he came home from that very voyage you knew of that he saw her and married her. She worked in a dressmaker's shop, and worked very well too, but she had offended his sister to begin with, one day when she was finding fault with some work that had been done for her, and so there was no end of trouble, and the young man had a great battle at home, and the more

he was fought the less inclined he was to yield, and at last off he went to be married, and never came home again until he died. It was a wretched story; he only lived two years, and they went from one place to another, and finally the end came in some Western town. He had not been happy with his wife, and they quarreled from time to time, and he asked to be brought back to Dunport and buried. This child was only a baby, and the Princes begged her mother to give her up, and used every means to try to make friends, and to do what was right. But I have always thought there was blame on both sides. At any rate the wife was insolent and unruly, and went flinging out of the house as soon as the funeral was over. I don't know what became of them for a while, but it always seemed to me as if poor Adeline must have had a touch of insanity, which faded away as consumption developed itself. Her mother's people were a fine, honest race, self-reliant and energetic, but there is a very bad streak on the other side. I have heard that she was seen begging somewhere, but I am not sure that it is true; at any rate she would neither come here to her own home nor listen to any plea from her husband's family, and at last came back to the farm one night like a ghost, carrying the child in her arms across the fields; all in rags and tatters, both of them. She confessed to me that she had meant to drown herself and little Nan together. I could never understand why she went down so fast. I know that she had been drinking. Some people might say that it was the scorn of her husband's relatives, but that is all nonsense, and I have no doubt she and the young man might have done very well if this hadn't spoiled all their chances at the outset. She was quite unbalanced and a strange, wild creature, very handsome in her girlhood, but morally undeveloped. It was impossible not to have a liking for her. I remember her when she was a baby."

"And yet people talk about the prosaic New England life!" exclaimed Dr. Ferris. "I wonder where I could match such a story as that, though I dare say that you know a dozen others. I tell you, Leslie, that for intense, self-centred, smouldering volcanoes of humanity, New England cannot be matched the world over. It's like the regions in Iceland that are full of geysers. I don't know whether it is the inheritance from those people who broke away from the old countries, and who ought to be matched to tremendous circumstances of life, but now and then there comes an amazingly explosive and uncontrollable temperament that goes all to pieces from its own conservation and accumulation of force. By and by you will have all blown up,—you quiet descendants of the Pilgrims and Puritans, and have let off your superfluous wickedness like blizzards; and when the blizzards of each family have spent themselves you will grow dull and sober, and all on a level, and be free from the troubles of a transition state. Now, you're neither a new country nor an old one. You ought to see something of the older civilizations to understand what peace of mind is. Unless some importation of explosive material from the westward stirs them up, one century is made the pattern for the next. But it is perfectly wonderful what this climate does for people who come to it,—a south of Ireland fellow, for instance, who has let himself be rained on and then waited for the sun to dry him again, and has grubbed a little in a bit of ground, just enough to hint to it that it had better be making a crop of potatoes for him. I always expect to see the gorse and daisies growing on the old people's heads to match the cabins. But they come over here and forget their idleness, and in a week or two the east winds are making them work, and thrashing them if they are slow, worse than any slave-driver who ever cracked his whip-lash. I wonder how you stand it; I do, indeed! I can't take an afternoon nap or have my coffee in bed of a morning without thinking I must put into port at the next church to be preached at."

Dr. Leslie laughed a little and shook his head gently. "It's very well for you to talk, Ferris," he said, "since you have done more work than any man I know. And I find this neighborhood entirely placid; one bit of news will last us a fortnight. I dare say Marilla will let everybody know that you have come to town, and have explained why she was ten minutes late, even to the minister."

"How about the little girl herself?" asked the guest presently; "she seems well combined, and likely, as they used to say when I was a boy."

Dr. Leslie resumed the subject willingly: "So far as I can see, she has the good qualities of all her ancestors without the bad ones. Her mother's mother was an old fashioned country woman of the best stock. Of course she resented what she believed to be her daughter's wrongs, and refused to have anything to do with her son-in-law's family, and kept the child as carefully as possible from any knowledge of them. Little Nan was not strong at first, but I insisted that she should be allowed to run free out of doors. It seems to me that up to seven or eight years of age children are simply bundles of inheritances, and I can see the traits of one ancestor after another; but a little later than the usual time she began to assert her own individuality, and has grown capitally well in mind and body ever since. There is an amusing trace of the provincial self-reliance and self-respect and farmer-like dignity, added to a quick instinct, and tact and ready courtesy, which must have come from the other side of her ancestry. She is more a child of the soil than any country child I know, and yet she would not put a city household to shame. She has seen nothing of the world of course, but you can see she isn't like the usual village school-girl. There is one thing quite remarkable. I believe she has grown up as naturally as a plant grows, not having been clipped back or forced in any unnatural direction. If ever a human being were untrammeled and left alone to see what will come of it, it is this child. And I will own I am very much interested to see what will appear later."

The navy surgeon's eyes twinkled at this enthusiasm, but he asked soberly what seemed to be our heroine's bent, so far as could be discovered, and laughed outright when he was gravely told that it was a medical bent; a surprising understanding of things pertaining to that most delightful profession.

"But you surely don't mean to let her risk her happiness in following that career?" Dr. Ferris inquired with feigned anxiety for his answer. "You surely aren't going to sacrifice that innocent creature to a theory! I know it's a theory; last time I was here, you could think of nothing but hypnotism or else the action of belladonna in congestion and inflammation of the brain;" and he left his very comfortable chair suddenly, with a burst of laughter, and began to walk up and down the room. "She has no relatives to protect her, and I consider it a shocking case of a guardian's inhumanity. Grown up naturally indeed! I don't doubt that you supplied her with Bell's 'Anatomy' for a picture-book and made her say over the names of the eight little bones of her wrist, instead of 'This little pig went to market.'"

"I only hope that you'll live to grow up yourself, Ferris," said his entertainer, "you'll certainly be an ornament to your generation. What a boy you are! I should think you would feel as old as Methuselah by this time, after having rattled from one place to the next all these years. Don't you begin to get tired?"

"No, I don't believe I do," replied Dr. Ferris, lending himself to this new turn of the conversation, but not half satisfied with the number of his jokes. "I used to be afraid I should, and so I tried to see everything I could of the world before my enthusiasm began to cool. And as for rattling to the next place, as you say, you show yourself to be no traveler by nature, or you wouldn't speak so slightingly. It is extremely dangerous to make long halts. I could cry with homesickness at the thought of the towns I have spent more than a month in; they are like the people one knows; if you see them once, you go away satisfied, and you can bring them to mind afterward, and think how they looked or just where it was you met them,—out of doors or at the club. But if you live with those people, and get fond of them, and have a thousand things to remember, you get more pain than pleasure out of it when you go away. And one can't be everywhere at once, so if you're going to care for things tremendously, you had better stay in one town altogether. No, give me a week or two, and then I've something calling me to the next place; somebody to talk with or a book to see, and off I go. Yet, I've done a good bit of work in my day after all. Did you see that paper of mine in the 'Lancet' about some experiments I made when I was last in India with those tree-growing jugglers? and I worked out some curious things about the mathematics of music on this last voyage home! Why, I thought it would tear my heart in two when I came away. I should have grown to look like the people, and you might have happened to find a likeness of me on a tea plate after another year or two. I made

all my plans one day to stay another winter, and next day at eleven o'clock I was steaming down the harbor. But there was a poor young lad I had taken a liking for, an English boy, who was badly off after an accident and needed somebody to look after him. I thought the best thing I could do was to bring him home. Are you going to fit your ward for general practice or for a specialty?"

"I don't know; that'll be for the young person herself to decide," said Dr. Leslie good-humoredly. "But she's showing a real talent for medical matters. It is quite unconscious for the most part, but I find that she understands a good deal already, and she sat here all the afternoon last week with one of my old medical dictionaries. I couldn't help looking over her shoulder as I went by, and she was reading about fevers, if you please, as if it were a story-book. I didn't think it was worth while to tell her we understood things better nowadays, and didn't think it best to bleed as much as old Dr. Rush recommended."

"You're like a hen with one chicken, Leslie," said the friend, still pacing to and fro. "But seriously, I like your notion of her having come to this of her own accord. Most of us are grown in the shapes that society and family preference and prejudice fasten us into, and don't find out until we are well toward middle life that we should have done a great deal better at something else. Our vocations are likely enough to be illy chosen, since few persons are fit to choose them for us, and we are at the most unreasonable stage of life when we choose them for ourselves. And what the Lord made some people for, nobody ever can understand; some of us are for use and more are for waste, like the flowers. I am in such a hurry to know what the next world is like that I can hardly wait to get to it. Good heavens! we live here in our familiar fashion, going at a jog-trot pace round our little circles, with only a friend or two to speak with who understand us, and a pipe and a jack-knife and a few books and some old clothes, and please ourselves by thinking we know the universe! Not a soul of us can tell what it is that sends word to our little fingers to move themselves back and forward."

"We're sure of two things at any rate," said Dr. Leslie, "love to God and love to man. And though I have lived here all my days, I have learned some truths just as well as if I had gone about with you, or even been to the next world and come back. I have seen too many lives go to pieces, and too many dissatisfied faces, and I have heard too many sorrowful confessions from these country death-beds I have watched beside, one after another, for twenty or thirty years. And if I can help one good child to work with nature and not against it, and to follow the lines marked out for her, and she turns out useful and intelligent, and keeps off the rocks of mistaking her duty, I shall be more than glad. I don't care whether it's a man's work or a woman's work; if it is hers I'm going to help her the very best way I can. I don't talk to her of course; she's much too young; but I watch her and mean to put the things in her way that she seems to reach out for and try to find. She is going to be very practical, for her hands can almost always work out her ideas already. I like to see her take hold of things, and I like to see her walk and the way she lifts her feet and puts them down again. I must say, Ferris, there is a great satisfaction in finding a human being once in a while that has some use of itself."

"You're right!" said Dr. Ferris; "but don't be disappointed when she's ten years older if she picks out a handsome young man and thinks there is nothing like housekeeping. Have you taken a look at my pocketful of heathen idols there yet? I don't think you've ever seen their mates."

The stayer at home smiled as if he understood his friend's quiet bit of pleasantry, and reached for one of the treasures, but folded it in his hand without looking at it and seemed to be lost in meditation. The surgeon concluded that he had had enough exercise and laid himself down on the wide sofa at the end of the room, from whence he could watch his companion's face. He clasped his hands under his head and looked eager and interested. He had grown to have something of the appearance of a foreigner, as people often do who have spent much time in eastern countries. The two friends were silent for some minutes, until an impatient voice roused Dr. Leslie from his reflections.

"It always makes me covet my neighbor's wits when I see you!" announced the wanderer. "If I settled myself into a respectable practice I should be obliged to march with the army of doctors who carry a great array of small weapons, and who find out what is the matter with their patients after

all sorts of experiment and painstaking analysis, and comparing the results of their thermometers and microscopes with scientific books of reference. After I have done all that, you know, if I have had good luck I shall come to exactly what you can say before you have been with a sick man five minutes. You have the true gift for doctoring, you need no medical dictator, and whatever you study and whatever comes to you in the way of instruction simply ministers to your intuition. It grows to be a wonderful second-sight in such a man as you. I don't believe you investigate a case and treat it as a botanist does a strange flower, once a month. You know without telling yourself what the matter is, and what the special difference is, and the relative dangers of this case and one apparently just like it across the street, and you could do this before you were out of the hospitals. I remember you!" and after a few vigorous puffs of smoke he went on; "It is all very well for the rest of the men to be proud of their book learning, but they don't even try to follow nature, as Sydenham did, who followed no man. I believe such study takes one to more theory and scientific digest rather than to more skill. It is all very well to know how to draw maps when one gets lost on a dark night, or even to begin with astronomical calculations and come down to a chemical analysis of the mud you stand in, but hang me if I wouldn't rather have the instinct of a dog who can go straight home across a bit of strange country. A man has no right to be a doctor if he doesn't simply make everything bend to his work of getting sick people well, and of trying to remedy the failures of strength that come from misuse or inheritance or ignorance. The anatomists and the pathologists have their place, but we must look to the living to learn the laws of life, not to the dead. A wreck shows you where the reef is, perhaps, but not how to manage a ship in the offing. The men who make it their business to write the books and the men who make it their business to follow them aren't the ones for successful practice."

Dr. Leslie smiled, and looked over his shoulder at his beloved library shelves, as if he wished to assure the useful volumes of his continued affection and respect, and said quietly, as if to beg the displeased surgeon's patience with his brethren: "They go on, poor fellows, studying the symptoms and never taking it in that the life power is at fault. I see more and more plainly that we ought to strengthen and balance the whole system, and aid nature to make the sick man well again. It is nature that does it after all, and diseases are oftener effects of illness than causes. But the young practitioners must follow the text-books a while until they have had enough experience to open their eyes to observe and have learned to think for themselves. I don't know which is worse; too much routine or no study at all. I was trying the other day to count up the different treatments of pneumonia that have been in fashion in our day; there must be seven or eight, and I am only afraid the next thing will be a sort of skepticism and contempt of remedies. Dr. Johnson said long ago that physicians were a class of men who put bodies of which they knew little into bodies of which they knew less, but certainly this isn't the fault of the medicines altogether; you and I know well enough they are often most stupidly used. If we blindly follow the medical dictators, as you call them, and spend our treatment on the effects instead of the causes, what success can we expect? We do want more suggestions from the men at work, but I suppose this is the same with every business. The practical medical men are the juries who settle all the theories of the hour, as they meet emergencies day after day."

"The men who have the true gift for their work," said Dr. Ferris impatiently. "I hadn't the conscience to go on myself, that's why I resigned, you know. I can talk about it, but I am not a good workman. But if there are going to be doctors in the next world, I wish I might be lucky enough to be equal to such a heavenly business. You thought I didn't care enough about the profession to go on, but it wasn't so. Do push your little girl ahead if she has the real fitness. I suppose it is a part of your endowment that you can distinguish the capacities and tendencies of health as well as illness; and there's one thing certain, the world cannot afford to do without the workmen who are masters of their business by divine right."

Dr. Leslie was looking at the jade-stone gods. "I suppose the poor fellows who chipped out these treasures of yours may have thought they were really putting a visible piece of Heaven within their neighbors' reach," he said. "We can't get used to the fact that whatever truly belongs to the next

world is not visible in this, and that there is idol-making and worshiping forever going on. When we let ourselves forget to educate our faith and our spiritual intellects, and lose sight of our relation and dependence upon the highest informing strength, we are trying to move our machinery by some inferior motive power. We worship our tools and beg success of them instead of remembering that we are all apprentices to the great Master of our own and every man's craft. It is the great ideas of our work that we need, and the laws of its truths. We shall be more intelligent by and by about making the best of ourselves; our possibilities are infinitely beyond what most people even dream. Spiritual laziness and physical laziness together keep us just this side of sound sleep most of the time. Perhaps you think it is a proper season for one at least?"

"Dear me, no!" said Dr. Ferris, who was evidently quite wide awake. "Do you remember how well Buckle says that the feminine intellect is the higher, and that the great geniuses of the world have possessed it? The gift of intuition reaches directly towards the truth, and it is only reasoning by deduction that can take flight into the upper air of life and certainty. You remember what he says about that?"

"Yes," said Dr. Leslie. "Yes, it isn't a thing one easily forgets. But I have long believed that the powers of Christ were but the higher powers of our common humanity. We recognize them dimly now and then, but few of us dare to say so yet. The world moves very slowly, doesn't it? If Christ were perfect man, He could hardly tell us to follow Him and be like Him, and yet know all the while that it was quite impossible, because a difference in his gifts made his character an unapproachable one to ours. We don't amount to anything, simply because we won't understand that we must receive the strength of Heaven into our souls; that it depends upon our degree of receptivity, and our using the added power that comes in that way; not in our taking our few tools, and our self-esteem and satisfaction with ourselves, and doing our little tricks like dancing dogs; proud because the other dogs can do one less than we, or only bark and walk about on their four legs. It is our souls that make our bodies worth anything, and the life of the soul doesn't come from its activity, or any performance of its own. Those things are only the results and the signs of life, not the causes of it."

"Christ in us, the hope of glory," said the other doctor gravely, "and Christ's glory was his usefulness and gift for helping others; I believe there's less quackery in our profession than any other, but it is amazing how we bungle at it. I wonder how you will get on with your little girl? If people didn't have theories of life of their own, or wouldn't go exactly the wrong way, it would be easier to offer assistance; but where one person takes a right direction of his own accord, there are twenty who wander to and fro."

"I may as well confess to you," he continued presently, "that I have had a *protégé* myself, but I don't look for much future joy in watching the development of my plots. He has taken affairs into his own hands, and I dare say it is much better for him, for if I had caught him young enough, I should have wished him to run the gauntlet of all the professions, not to speak of the arts and sciences. He was a clever young fellow; I saw him married the day before I left England. His wife was the daughter of a curate, and he the younger son of a younger son, and it was a love affair worth two or three story-books. It came to be a question of money alone. I had known the boy the year before in Bombay and chanced to find him one day in the Marine Hospital at Nagasaki. We had been up into the interior together. He was recommended to me as a sort of secretary and assistant and knew more than I did about most things. When he caught sight of me he cried like a baby, and I sat down and heard what the trouble was, for I had let him go off with somebody who could give him a good salary,—a government man of position, and I thought poor Bob would be put in the way of something better. Dear me, the climate was killing him before my eyes, and I took passage for both of us on the next day's steamer. When I got him home I turned my bank account into a cheque and tucked it into his pocket, and told him to marry his wife and settle down and be respectable and forget such a wandering old fellow as I."

The listener made a little sound of mingled admiration and disgust.

"So you're the same piece of improvidence as ever! I wonder if you worked your passage over to Boston, or came as a stowaway? Well, I'm glad to give you house-room, and, to tell the truth, I was wondering how I should get on to-morrow without somebody to help me in a piece of surgery. My neighbors are not very skillful, but they're good men every one of them, unless it's old Jackson, who knows no more about the practice of medicine than a turtle knows about the nearest fixed star. Ferris! I don't wonder at your giving away the last cent you had in the world, I only wonder that you had a cent to give. I hope the young man was grateful, that's all, only I'm not sure I like his taking it."

"He thought I had enough more, I dare say. He said so much I couldn't stand his nonsense. He'll use it better than I could," said the guest briefly. "As I said, I couldn't bring him up; in the first place I haven't the patience, and beside, it wouldn't be just to him. But you must let me know how you get on with your project; I shall make you a day's visit once in six months."

"That'll be good luck," responded the cheerful host. "Now that I am growing old I find I wish for company oftener; just the right man, you know, to come in for an hour or two late in the evening to have a cigar, and not say a word if he doesn't feel like it."

The two friends were very comfortable together; the successive cigars burnt themselves out slowly, and the light of the great lamp was bright in the room. Here and there a tinge of red shone out on the backs of the books that stood close together in the high cases. There was an old engraving or two, and in one corner a solemn bronze figure of Dante, thin and angular, as if he had risen from his coffin to take a last look at this world. Marilla had often spoken of him disrespectfully, and had suggested many other ornaments which might be brought to take his place, but the doctor had never acted upon her suggestions. From the corner of one book-case there hung a huge wasp's nest, and over the mantel-shelf, which was only wide enough for some cigar boxes and a little clock and a few vials of medicines, was a rack where three or four riding whips and a curious silver bit and some long-stemmed pipes found unmolested quarters; and in one corner were some walking sticks and a fishing rod or two which had a very ancient unused look. There was a portrait of Dr. Leslie's grandfather opposite the fire-place; a good-humored looking old gentleman who had been the most famous of the Oldfields ministers. The study-table was wide and long, but it was well covered with a miscellaneous array of its owner's smaller possessions, and the quick-eyed visitor smiled as he caught sight of Nan's new copy of Miss Edgeworth's "Parent's Assistant" lying open and face downward on the top of an instrument case.

Marilla did not hear the doctor and his guest tramp up to bed until very late at night, and though she had tried to keep awake she had been obliged to take a nap first and then wake up again to get the benefit of such an aggravating occasion. "I'm not going to fret myself trying to make one of my baked omelets in the morning," she assured herself, "they'll keep breakfast waiting three quarters of an hour, and it would fall flat sure's the world, and the doctor's got to ride to all p'ints of the compass to-morrow, too."

X
ACROSS THE STREET

It would be difficult to say why the village of Oldfields should have been placed in the least attractive part of the township, if one were not somewhat familiar with the law of growth of country communities. The first settlers, being pious kindred of the Pilgrims, were mindful of the necessity of a meeting-house, and the place for it was chosen with reference to the convenience of most of the worshipers. Then the parson was given a parsonage and a tract of glebe land somewhere in the vicinity of his pulpit, and since this was the centre of social attraction, the blacksmith built his shop at the nearest cross-road. And when some enterprising citizen became possessed of an idea that there were traders enough toiling to and fro on the rough highways to the nearest larger village to make it worth his while to be an interceptor, the first step was taken toward a local centre of commerce, and the village was fairly begun. It had not yet reached a remarkable size, though there was a time-honored joke because an enthusiastic old woman had said once, when four or five houses and a new meeting-house were being built all in one summer, that she expected now that she might live to see Oldfields a seaport town. There had been a great excitement over the second meeting-house, to which the conservative faction had strongly objected, but, after the radicals had once gained the day, other innovations passed without public challenge. The old First Parish Church was very white and held aloft an imposing steeple, and strangers were always commiserated if they had to leave town without the opportunity of seeing its front by moonlight. Behind this, and beyond a green which had been the playground of many generations of boys and girls, was a long row of horse-sheds, where the farmers' horses enjoyed such part of their Sunday rest as was permitted them after bringing heavy loads of rural parishioners to their public devotions. The Sunday church-going was by no means so carefully observed in these days as in former ones, when disinclination was anything but a received excuse. In Parson Leslie's—the doctor's grandfather's—day, it would have condemned a man or woman to the well-merited reproof of their acquaintances. And indeed most parishioners felt deprived of a great pleasure when, after a week of separation from society, of a routine of prosaic farm-work, they were prevented from seeing their friends parade into church, from hearing the psalm-singing and the sermon, and listening to the news afterward. It was like going to mass and going to the theatre and the opera, and making a round of short calls, and having an outing in one's own best clothes to see other people's, all rolled into one; beside which, there was (and is) a superstitious expectation of good luck in the coming week if the religious obligations were carefully fulfilled. So many of the old ideas of the efficacy of ecclesiasticism still linger, most of them by no means unlawfully. The elder people of New England are as glad to have their clergyman visit them in their last days as if he granted them absolution and extreme unction. The old traditions survive in our instincts, although our present opinions have long since ticketed many thoughts and desires and customs as out of date and quite exploded.

We go so far in our vigorous observance of the first commandment, and our fear of worshiping strange gods, that sometimes we are in danger of forgetting that we must worship God himself. And worship is something different from a certain sort of constant church-going, or from even trying to be conformers and to keep our own laws and our neighbors'.

Because an old-fashioned town like Oldfields grows so slowly and with such extreme deliberation, is the very reason it seems to have such a delightful completeness when it has entered fairly upon its maturity. It is possessed of kindred virtues to a winter pear, which may be unattractive during its preparatory stages, but which takes time to gather from the ground and from the air a pleasant and rewarding individuality and sweetness. The towns which are built in a hurry can be left in a hurry without a bit of regret, and if it is the fate or fortune of the elder villages to find themselves the foundation upon which modern manufacturing communities rear their thinly built houses and

workshops, and their quickly disintegrating communities of people, the weaknesses of these are more glaring and hopeless in the contrast. The hurry to make money and do much work, and the ambition to do good work, war with each other, but, as Longfellow has said, the lie is the hurrying second-hand of the clock, and the truth the slower hand that waits and marks the hour. The New England that built itself houses a hundred years ago was far less oppressed by competition and by other questions with which the enormous increase of population is worrying its younger citizens. And the overgrown Oldfields that increase now, street by street, were built then a single steady sound-timbered house at a time, and all the neighbors watched them rise, and knew where the planks were sawn, and where the chimney bricks were burnt.

In these days when Anna Prince was young and had lately come to live in the doctor's square house, with the three peaked windows in the roof, and the tall box borders and lilac bushes in its neat front yard, Oldfields was just beginning to wake from a fifty years' architectural sleep, and rub its eyes, and see what was thought about a smart little house with a sharp gabled roof, and much scalloping of its edges, which a new store-keeper had seen fit to build. There was one long street which had plenty of room on either side for most of the houses, and where it divided, each side of the First Parish Church, it became the East road and the West road, and the rest of the dwellings strayed off somewhat undecidedly toward the world beyond. There were a good many poplars in the front yards, though their former proud ranks were broken in many places, so that surviving veterans stood on guard irregularly before the houses, where usually one or two members of the once busy households were also left alone. Many of the people who lived in the village had outlying land and were farmers of it, but beside the doctor's there were some other households which the land supported indirectly, either through professions or because some kind ancestor had laid by enough money for his children and grandchildren. The ministers were both excellent men; but Dr. Leslie was the only man who looked far ahead or saw much or cared much for true success. In Titian's great Venetian picture of the Presentation of the Virgin, while the little maiden goes soberly up the steps of the temple, in the busy crowd beneath only one man is possessed by the thought that something wonderful is happening, and lifts his head, forgetting the buyers and sellers and gossipers, as his eyes follow the sacred sight. Life goes on everywhere like that fragment of it in the picture, but while the man who knows more than his fellows can be found in every company, and sees the light which beckons him on to the higher meanings and better gifts, his place in society is not always such a comfortable and honored one as Dr. Leslie's. What his friends were apt to call his notions were not of such aggressive nature that he was accused of outlawry, and he was apt to speak his mind uncontradicted and undisturbed. He cared little for the friction and attrition, indeed for the inspiration, which one is sure to have who lives among many people, and which are so dear and so helpful to most of us who fall into ruts if we are too much alone. He loved his friends and his books, though he understood both as few scholars can, and he cared little for social pleasure, though Oldfields was, like all places of its size and dignity, an epitome of the world. One or two people of each class and rank are as good as fifty, and, to use the saying of the doctor's friend, old Captain Finch: "Human nature is the same the world over."

Through the long years of his solitary life, and his busy days as a country practitioner, he had become less and less inclined to take much part in what feeble efforts the rest of the townspeople made to entertain themselves. He was more apt to loiter along the street, stopping here and there to talk with his neighbors at their gates or their front-yard gardening, and not infrequently asked some one who stood in need of such friendliness to take a drive with him out into the country. Nobody was grieved at remembering that he was a repository of many secrets; he was a friend who could be trusted always, though he was one who had been by no means slow to anger or unwilling at times to administer rebuke.

One Sunday afternoon, late in November, while the first snow-storm of the year was beginning, Dr. Leslie threw down a stout French medical work of high renown as if it had failed to fulfil its mission of being instructive first and interesting afterward. He rose from his chair and stood looking

at the insulted volume as if he had a mind to apologize and try again, but kept his hands behind him after all. It was thinly dressed in fluttering paper covers, and was so thick and so lightly bound that it had a tendency to divide its material substance into parts, like the seventhlies and eighthlies of an old-fashioned sermon. "Those fellows must be in league with the book-binders over here," grumbled the doctor. "I must send word to that man in New York to have some sort of cover put on these things before they come down." Then he lifted the book again and poised it on one hand, looking at its irregular edges, and reflecting at length that it would be in much better condition if he had not given it a careless crushing in the corner of his carriage the day before. It had been sunshiny, pleasant weather, and he had taken Nan for a long drive in the Saturday half-holiday. He had decided, before starting, that she should manage the reins and he would think over one or two matters and read a while; it had been a great convenience lately that Nan understood the responsibility of a horse and carriage. He was finding her a more and more useful little companion. However, his studies and reflections had been postponed until some other time, for Nan had been very eager to talk about some of her lessons in which it seemed his duty to take an interest. The child seemed stronger and better that autumn than he had ever known her, and her mind had suddenly fastened itself upon certain of her studies. She seemed very quick and very accurate, the doctor thought, and the two traits do not always associate themselves.

He left the table and walked quickly to the west window, and, clasping his hands behind him, stood looking out into the front yard and the street beyond. The ground was already white and he gave a little sigh, for winter weather is rarely a source of happiness to a doctor, although this member of the profession was not made altogether sorrowful by it. He sometimes keenly enjoyed a hard tramp of a mile or two when the roads were so blocked and the snow so blinding that he left his horse in some sheltering barn on his way to an impatient sufferer.

A little way down the street on the other side was a house much like his own, with a row of tall hemlocks beside it, and a front fence higher and more imposing than his, with great posts at the gateway, which held slender urns aloft with funereal solemnity. The doctor's eyesight was not far from perfect, and he looked earnestly at the windows of one of the lower rooms and saw a familiar sight enough; his neighbor Mrs. Graham's face in its accustomed quarter of the sash. Dr. Leslie half smiled as the thought struck him that she always sat so exactly in the same place that her white cap was to be seen through the same lower window-pane. "Most people would have moved their chairs about until they wore holes in the floor," he told himself, and then remembered how many times he had gone to look over at his placid friend, in her favorite afternoon post of observation. He was strongly attached to her, and he reminded himself that she was growing old and that he must try to see her oftener. He valued her companionship, more because he knew it was always ready for him, than because he always availed himself of it, but the sense of mutual dependence made them very familiar to each other when they did meet and had time for a bit of quiet talk.

Dr. Leslie suddenly turned; he had watched long enough to make sure that Mrs. Graham was alone; her head had not moved for many minutes; and at first he was going out of the front door, from some instinct he would hardly have been willing to acknowledge, but he resolutely turned and went out to the dining-room, to tell Marilla, after his usual professional custom of giving notice of his whereabouts, that he was going to Mrs. Graham's. A prompt inquiry came from the kitchen to know if anything ailed her, to which the doctor returned a scornful negative and escaped through the side-door which gave entrance both to the study and the dining-room. There was the usual service at Marilla's meeting-house, but she had not ventured out to attend it, giving the weather and a grumbling toothache for her reasons, though she concealed the fact that the faithless town milliner had disappointed her about finishing her winter bonnet. Marilla had begun life with certain opinions which she had never changed, though time and occasion had lessened the value of some of them. She liked to count herself among those who are persecuted for conscience's sake, and was immensely fond of an argument and of having it known that she was a dissenter from the First Parish Church.

Mrs. Graham looked up with surprise from her book to see the doctor coming in from the street, and, being helplessly lame, sat still, and put out her hand to greet him, with a very pleased look on her face. "Is there anything the matter with me?" she asked. "I have begun to think you don't care to associate with well people; you don't usually go to church in the afternoon either, so you haven't taken refuge here because Mr. Talcot is ill. I must say that I missed hearing the bell; I shall lose myself altogether by the middle of the week. One must have some landmarks."

"Marilla complained yesterday that she was all at sea because her apple pies gave out a day too soon. She put the bread to rise the wrong night, and everything went wrong about the sweeping. It has been a week of great domestic calamity with us, but Nan confided to me this morning that there was some trouble with our bonnet into the bargain. I had forgotten it was time for that," said the doctor, laughing. "We always have a season of great anxiety and disaster until the bonnet question is settled. I keep out of the way as much as I can. Once I tried to be amusing, and said it was a pity the women did not follow their grandmothers' fashion and make a good Leghorn structure last ten years and have no more trouble about it; but I was assured that there wasn't a milliner now living who could set such an arrangement going."

"Marilla's taste is not what one might call commonplace," said Mrs. Graham, with a smile. "I think her summer head-covering was a little the most remarkable we have had yet. She dresses so decently otherwise, good soul!"

"It was astonishing," said the doctor gravely, as he stood before the fire thinking how pleasant the room looked; almost as familiar as his own study, with its heavy mahogany furniture and two old portraits and few quaint ornaments. Mrs. Graham's geraniums were all flourishing and green and even in bloom, unlike most treasures of their kind. There was a modern element in the room also,—some pretty cushions and other bits of embroidery; for Mrs. Graham had some grandchildren who were city born and bred, and who made little offerings to her from time to time. On the table near her and between the front windows were many new books and magazines, and though the two neighbors kept up a regular system of exchange, the doctor went nearer to see what might be found. There were a few minutes of silence, and he became conscious that Mrs. Graham was making up her mind to say something, but when she spoke it was only to ask if there were anything serious the matter with the minister.

"Oh, no," said the doctor, "he's a dyspeptic, nervous soul, too conscientious! and when the time arrives for the sacrifice of pigs, and his whole admiring parish vie with each other to offer spare-ribs on that shrine, it goes hard with the poor man."

This was worth hearing, but Mrs. Graham was a little sorry that she had let such a good chance go by for saying something that was near her heart, so presently she added, "I am sorry that poor Marilla hasn't a better gift at personal decoration. It seems a pity to let her disfigure that pretty child with such structures in the way of head-gear. I was so glad when that abominable great summer hat was laid by for the season."

"It was pretty bad," the doctor agreed, in a provokingly indifferent tone, whereupon Mrs. Graham's interest was rekindled, and saying to herself that the poor man did not know the danger and foolishness of such carelessness, she ventured another comment.

"So much depends upon giving a child's taste the right direction."

Dr. Leslie had taken up a magazine, and seemed to have found something that pleased him, but he at once laid it down and glanced once or twice at his hostess, as if he hoped for future instructions. "You see I don't know anything about it, and Nan doesn't think of her clothes at all, so far as I can tell, and so poor Marilla has to do the best she can," he said mildly.

"Oh dear, yes," answered Mrs. Graham, not without impatience. "But the child's appearance is of some importance, and since a dollar or two doesn't make any difference to you, she should be made to look like the little lady that she is. Dear old Mrs. Thacher would turn in her grave, for she certainly had a simple good taste that was better than this. Marilla became the easy prey of that

foolish little woman who makes bonnets on the East road. She has done more to deprave the ideas of our townspeople than one would believe, and they tell you with such pleasure that she used to work in New York, as if that settled the question. It is a comfort to see old Sally Turner and Miss Betsy Milman go by in their decent dark silk bonnets that good Susan Martin made for them. If I could go out to-morrow I believe I would rather hunt for a very large velvet specimen of her work, which is somewhere upstairs in a big bandbox, than trust myself to these ignorant hands. It is a great misfortune to a town if it has been disappointed in its milliner. You are quite at her mercy, and, worse than all, liable to entire social misapprehension when you venture far from home."

"So bonnets are not a question of free will and individual responsibility?" asked the doctor soberly. "I must say that I have wondered sometimes if the women do not draw lots for them. But what shall I do about the little girl? I am afraid I do her great injustice in trying to bring her up at all—it needs a woman's eye."

"Your eye is just as good as anybody's," responded Mrs. Graham quickly, lest the doctor should drift into sad thought about his young wife who had been so long dead and yet seemed always a nearer and dearer living presence to him. He was apt to say a word or two about her and not answer the next question which was put to him, and presently go silently away,—but to-day Mrs. Graham had important business in hand.

"My daughter will be here next week," she observed, presently, "and I'm sure that she will do any shopping for you in Boston with great pleasure. We might forestall Marilla's plans. You could easily say when you go home that you have spoken to me about it. I think it would be an excellent opportunity now, while the East Road establishment is in disfavor," and when the doctor smiled and nodded, his friend and hostess settled herself comfortably in her chair, and felt that she had gained a point.

The sunshine itself could hardly have made that south parlor look pleasanter. There was a log in the fire that was wet, and singing gently to itself, as if the sound of the summer rustlings and chirpings had somehow been stored away in its sap, and above it were some pieces of drier white birch, which were sending up a yellow conflagration to keep the marauding snow-flakes from coming down the chimney. The geraniums looked brighter than by daylight, and seemed to hold their leaves toward the fireplace as if they were hands; and were even leaning out a little way themselves and lifting their blossoms like torches, as if they were a reserve force, a little garrison of weaker soldiers who were also enemies of the cold. The gray twilight was gathering out of doors; the trees looked naked and defenceless, as one saw them through the windows. Mrs. Graham tapped the arms of her chair gently with the tips of her fingers, and in a few minutes the doctor closed the book he was looking over and announced that the days were growing very short. There was something singularly pleasant to both the friends in their quiet Sunday afternoon companionship.

"You used to pay me a Sunday visit every week," said the old lady, pleased to find that her guest still lingered. "I don't know why, but I always have a hope that you will find time to run over for half an hour. I said to myself yesterday that a figure of me in wax would do just as well as anything nowadays. I get up and dress myself, and make the journey downstairs, and sit here at the window and have my dinner and go through the same round day after day. If it weren't for a certain amount of expense it incurs, and occupation to other people, I think it would be of very little use. However, there are some people still left who need me. Who is it says—Béranger perhaps—that to love benefits one's self, and to inspire love benefits others. I like to think that the children and grandchildren have the old place to think of and come back to. I can see that it is a great bond between them all, and that is very good. I begin to feel like a very old woman; it would be quite different, you know, if I were active and busy out of doors, and the bustling sort of person for which nature intended me. As it is, my mind is bustling enough for itself and its body both."

"Well," said the doctor, laughing a little, "what is it now?"

"The little girl," answered Mrs. Graham, gravely. "I think it is quite time she knew something of society. Don't tell yourself that I am notional and frivolous; I know you have put a great deal of hope and faith and affection into that child's career. It would disappoint you dreadfully if she were not interesting and harmonious to people in general. It seems a familiar fact now that she should have come to live with you, that she should be growing up in your house; but the first thing we know she will be a young lady instead of an amusing child, and I think that you cannot help seeing that a great deal of responsibility belongs to you. She must be equipped and provisioned for the voyage of life; she must have some resources."

"But I think she has more than most children."

"Yes, yes, I dare say. She is a bright little creature, but her brightness begins to need new things to work upon. She does very well at school now, I hear, and she minds very well and is much less lawless than she used to be; but she is like a candle that refuses to burn, and is satisfied with admiring its candlestick. She is quite the queen of the village children in one way, and in another she is quite apart from them. I believe they envy her and look upon her as being of another sort, and yet count her out of half their plans and pleasures, and she runs home, not knowing whether to be pleased or hurt, and pulls down half a dozen of your books and sits proudly at the window. Her poor foolish mother had some gifts, but she went adrift very soon, and I should teach Nan her duty to her neighbor, and make her take in the idea that she owes something to the world beside following out her own most satisfying plans. When I was a young woman it was a most blessed discovery to me—though I was not any quicker at making it than other people, perhaps,—that, beside being happy myself and valuable to myself, I must fit myself into my place in society. We are seldom left to work alone, you know. No, not even you. I know too much about you to believe that. And it isn't enough that we are willing to talk about ourselves. We must learn to understand the subjects of the day that everybody talks about, and to make sure of a right to stand upon the highest common ground wherever we are. Society is a sort of close corporation, and we must know its watchwords, and keep an interest in its interests and affairs. I call a gentleman the man who, either by birth or by nature, belongs to the best society. There may be bad gentlemen and good gentlemen, but one must feel instinctively at home with a certain class, representatives of which are likely to be found everywhere.

"And as for Nan, you will be disappointed if she does not understand a little later your own way of looking at things. She mustn't grow up full of whims and indifferences. I am too fond of you to look forward calmly to your being disappointed, and I do believe she will be a most lovely, daughterly, friendly girl, who will keep you from being lonely as you grow older, and be a great blessing in every way. Yet she has a strange history, and is in a strange position. I hope you will find a good school for her before very long."

This was said after a moment's pause, and with considerable hesitation, and Mrs. Graham was grateful for the gathering darkness which sheltered her, and not a little surprised at the doctor's answer.

"I have been thinking of that," he said quickly, "but it is a great puzzle at present and I am thankful to say, I think it is quite safe to wait a year or two yet. You and I live so much apart from society that we idealize it a good deal, though you are a stray-away bit of it. We too seldom see the ideal gentleman or lady; we have to be contented with keeping the ideal in our minds, it seems to me, and saying that this man is gentlemanly, and that woman ladylike. But I do believe in aiming at the best things, and turning this young creature's good instincts and uncommon powers into the proper channels instead of letting her become singular and self-centred because she does not know enough of people of her own sort."

Mrs. Graham gave a little sound of approval that did not stand for any word in particular: "I wonder if her father's people will ever make any claim to her? She said something about her aunt one day; I think it was to hear whatever I might answer. It seemed to me that the poor child had more pleasure in this unknown possession than was worth while; she appeared to think of her as a sort of fairy godmother who might descend in Oldfields at any moment."

"I did not know she thought of her at all," announced the doctor, somewhat dismayed. "She never has talked about her aunt to me. I dare say that she has been entertained with the whole miserable story."

"Oh, no," answered Mrs. Graham, placidly. "I don't think that is likely, but it is quite reasonable that the child should be aware of some part of it by this time. The Dyer neighbors are far from being reticent, good creatures, and they have little to remember that approaches the interest and excitement of that time. Do you know anything about Miss Prince nowadays? I have not heard anything of her in a long while."

"She still sends the yearly remittance, which I acknowledge and put into the savings bank as I always have done. When Nan came to me I advised Miss Prince that I wished to assume all care of her and should be glad if she would give me entire right to the child, but she took no notice of the request. It really makes no practical difference. Only," and the doctor became much embarrassed, "I must confess that I have a notion of letting her study medicine by and by if she shows a fitness for it."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.